

Emma Sullivan-Bisset, Helen Bradley, and Paul Noordhof, eds. *Art and Belief*. Oxford University Press 2017. 272 pp. \$67.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198805403).

One of the many features that distinguish humans from non-humans is that they are story-telling creatures, and the view that such stories may be sources of wisdom or knowledge is as old as the hills. That said, the contrary view that such stories—especially those of evident fancy or make-believe—are not epistemically and/or morally trustworthy or reliable is also of considerable antiquity, harking back at least to the origins of western (analytical) philosophy in the dialogues of Plato. This accomplished collection of recent essays on the epistemic status and dimensions of literary narrative—with particular emphasis on the potential of creative and imaginative literature for the formation of reliable or correct beliefs about the world—shows that this issue is still very much alive and well in contemporary philosophy.

Indeed, it appears to be the more ambitious aim of this volume to show that questions of the epistemic status of narrative art (though the volume focuses fairly exclusively on creative and imaginative literature) are of interest not just to philosophers of art or aesthetics, but to those exploring the epistemic status and dimensions of belief as such. To this end, contributors to this volume have evidently been conscripted from both of these—admittedly often disconnected—fields of contemporary philosophical enquiry. However, while this has, as the editors have clearly hoped, yielded significant cross-disciplinary insights into connections between contemporary work on belief and recent developments in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, the weave is also far from seamless and it is often plain enough where the prevailing philosophical concerns of contributors lie. Thus, while some contributors (from the belief end) seem primarily concerned with questions about whether the very nature of (creative, imaginative, fictional) literature is such as to disable it as a source of anything worth regarding as reliable epistemic testimony or belief, others (from the art and aesthetics end) are clearly more interested in making sense of literary or other artistic narrative as a distinctive source of wisdom or insight that may less readily fall within the scope of knowledge as traditionally conceived by epistemologists. So, irrespective of the particular conceptual disagreements that can only be expected from any collection of this philosophical kind, this collaboration is generally far from a complete meeting of like-minded professional concerns and interests.

This general divergence of professional concerns is fairly apparent in the structure and organization of the book—about which we should now say something. After a clear introduction in which the editors chart (with help of a useful visual diagram) the overall conceptual terrain of the work, the twelve main chapters are distributed across four sections. In the first section, entitled ‘Author Testimony,’ three essays by Kathleen Stock, Eva-Maria Konrad and Anna Ichino and Gregory Currie all consider—by appeal to social scientific evidence as well as philosophical argument—the extent to which works of literary fiction may be considered reliable sources of genuine knowledge or testimony about the world or human affairs. Generally, while Stock and Konrad are inclined to slightly different positive responses to this issue, Ichino and Currie are more sceptical. In some contrast, however, the four chapters of the second section—significantly entitled ‘Non-Testimonial Epistemic Contributions of Fictions’—are concerned to explore various ways of conceiving the epistemic benefits of literary and artistic appreciation that go beyond or are not reducible to the acquisition of credible information or facts about the world of objective experience. Briefly for now—though we shall shortly return to these chapters—while James Young seeks to understand the epistemic benefits of narrative literature and art in terms of what he calls ‘experience-

taking,' Peter Lamarque generally rejects belief-focused approaches to such literature in favour of the genuine aesthetic deliverances of what he calls 'opaque reading,' Allan Hazlett defends a particular epistemic conception of imagination that interestingly bypasses belief (as a commonly conceived necessary conditions of knowledge), and Lucy O'Brien argues for a version of the view that literature and art are concerned less with the communication of knowledge of the world and more with personal understanding of our psychological and/or moral selves.

The three chapters of the third section of the book, entitled 'Belief, Truth and Attitudes from Fictional Persuasion,' largely address—via exploration of the relation of belief to truth—the doxastic status of attitudes formed by engagement with literary narrative and, as in the case of the first section, there is significant opposition here. In the first of these chapters, Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Lisa Bertolotti argue that attitudes formed from encounters with fiction raise serious problems for the familiar teleological account of belief as truth-focused (and, presumably vice versa). However, this view is almost directly countered in the second chapter by Asbjorn Steglich Peterson, which precisely argues that truth-focused malfunctions of beliefs following from engagement with literature do not threaten the teleological account. This position seems to be effectively reinforced in the third chapter by Lesley Buckwalter and Kathleen Tulliman's rebuttal of the Distinct Attitude View of Fictional Belief (DAV) which holds that the attitudes engendered by fiction must have a different psychological character from standard beliefs. While the fourth and final section of the work, entitled 'Aesthetic Appreciation and Belief,' also concerns the doxastic status and implications of fictional literature, it focuses more particularly on the question of whether aesthetic evaluations—judgements on the aesthetic worth of a given artwork—may be endorsed by agents on the basis of testimony. In brief, the two chapters of this section again present directly opposed positions on this issue, Jon Robson arguing that there is little reason to suppose that testimony is no less possible in aesthetic than other matters, and Daniel Whiting arguing that at least what he calls the judgements of 'bare aesthetic testimony' are not so communicable.

What is clearly common to all the chapters of the first, third, and fourth sections of this work is concern with issues of the epistemic status of beliefs formed under the influence of fictional or imaginative literature: whether the fictional origins of such attitudes render them unreliable, alter their psychological character or completely undermine their status as beliefs—and all these sections present opposed positions on this. For what it is worth, despite much philosophical sophistication and ingenuity on all sides, it is the present view that the cases for literature as a source of genuine belief are mainly compelling and that the arguments against are overstated or otherwise flawed. Be that as it may, the more pressing issue may be that of whether the sort of fiction-derived knowledge or belief with which these chapters are concerned is quite the sort of thing that people have mainly had in mind in regarding imaginative literature as a source of wisdom or insight. From this viewpoint, it would seem to be the essays of section three that explore more promising directions and possibilities.

That said, the odd man out here is evidently Peter Lamarque, who defends a form of aestheticism according to which reading creative or imaginative literature to acquire knowledge, beliefs or other information is largely to miss its literary or artistic point. For Lamarque, such literature requires an 'opaque' reading which involves appreciation and attention to (presumably) its formal and expressive features to the end of promoting other than cognitive (or at any rate, epistemic) responses or sensibilities. Again, however, Lamarque's distinction between 'transparent' and 'opaque' reading seems rather overstated and something of a false dichotomy. While it may be that one cannot fully appreciate (say) a Dickens' novel without his opaque reading, such appreciation must surely involve giving some credence to the picture of Victorian London and the wretched

conditions of the poor – not to mention some grasp of implied moral evaluations of this picture—that is evidently the author’s deliberate artistic intent to convey. Appreciating the novel therefore may not be a matter of *either* opaque *or* transparent reading.

On the other hand, the remaining three chapters of section two by Young, Hazlett and O’Brien do seem to offer more promising perspectives on the time-honoured view that creative and imaginative literature or other art are distinctive sources of genuine human wisdom and knowledge, and—while on the face of it somewhat differently framed—might be headed in the same overall direction. Hazlett’s (epistemically) provocative chapter defends a form of literary imagination that promises to provide a form of knowledge that does not require belief (or to which, at any rate, belief may not be of first concern). Still, imagination is a very slippery notion, often used to refer to capacities of highly dubious epistemic value: it is therefore possible that that the kind of epistemic capacities to which Hazlett gives this title might smell as sweet by other names. At all events, what (for example) Shakespeare may appear to do in (say) *Othello* (certainly a work of *his* imagination) is to invite us to suppose or make-believe a state of affairs in which a man’s jealousy toward his wife is aroused and manipulated with the result that he murders her. This invitation to make-believe transports readers or spectators of the play into precisely what Young characterizes as ‘experience-taking’—a condition of putting ourselves hypothetically in the shoes of others with a view to greater understanding of or sympathy for their peculiarly different human predicaments. This, of course, could be a rich source of various knowledge of the geographical, cultural or political circumstances in which such supposed events are set.

But it would also seem that Shakespeare and other great writers who extend this invitation to ‘experience-take’ have a further aim to help readers or spectators see *themselves* in the plights of others that are in key respects *commonly* human. Simply put, I may learn something of the potentially adverse consequences for human flourishing of ambition in general from reading *Macbeth*, but also learn something of the psychological or moral dangers of my own more personal or local ambition of the kind that O’Brien perhaps has in mind in her chapter. The less good news, however, is that this raises the thorny old problem of whether it is possible to discover grounds for such moral or normative evaluation of ourselves or others of the degree of objectivity or universality that might also merit the title of knowledge. That said, there may yet be ample resources in both ancient and modern philosophy to sustain this idea.

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