

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
Prof. Funkhouser  
4/18/05  
Olsen, "Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice"

I.

\*Reductive and non-reductive theories of literature: Reductive theories hold that something is a literary work in virtue of its *textual features*, whereas non-reductive theories deny this. For non-reductive theories, *aesthetic features* (which are distinct from textual features) are essential to making something a literary work.

"A textual feature is a feature of style, content, or structure." (422)

II.

\*Olsen will defend non-reductive theories, which he claims are out of fashion.

\*Supervenience theory: "The supervenience-theory accounts for aesthetic features by construing them as supervenient on textual features. An aesthetic feature, the theory says, is identified by a reader, in a literary work, through an aesthetic judgement as what one may call a *constellation* of textual features." (423)

--The aesthetic judgment plays an essential role here.

--Example: Shakespeare's sonnet 129.

III.

\*The supervenience theory position is supposed to conflict with the positions of Sibley (recall his article "Aesthetic Concepts") and Strawson.

"So the fact that there are no general descriptive criteria for the application of aesthetic terms does not mean that aesthetic judgements are arbitrary or impossible to support. There is, the supervenience-theory claims, a characteristic pattern of support with its own peculiar logic which defines aesthetic judgement as a type." (424)

--2 features are distinctive of this pattern of support: an appeal to aesthetic sensibility and the directive character of aesthetic judgment.

"According to the supervenience-theory, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for saying about somebody that he has identified an aesthetic feature that he is able to produce a successful directive argument in support of it, thus bringing us around to his way of 'seeing' a set of textual features in a literary work." (425)

IV.

"And this is a general point about literary aesthetic judgements: the imaginative reconstruction of the literary work, by help of a set of general concepts enabling the

reader to refer to and interrelate the textual features of the work, constitutes his understanding and appreciation of the text as a literary work of art. Thus, in literary aesthetic argument, the aesthetic sensibility is pushed into the background.” (426)

#### V.

\*In this section Olsen spends quite a bit of space developing an analogy between the institution of literature and monetary institutions.

“The present suggestion is that it [literature] is a social practice in a stricter sense; i.e. a practice whose *existence depends* both on a background of concepts and conventions which create the possibility of identifying literary works and provide a framework for appreciation, and on people actually applying these concepts and conventions in their approach to literary works. If literature is such an institution then aesthetic judgement must be understood as defined by the practice and apart from the practice aesthetic judgements are impossible.” (428)

--The idea is that, without the understanding of these background institutional facts, the aesthetic features of literature would be indiscernible.

#### VI.

\*If literature is a social practice, then the aesthetician’s emphasis should be placed on the social practice, of which the reader and text are elements, rather than on the relationship between the reader and text themselves.

#### VII.

\*Granted there are disputes within the institution over the correct interpretation of particular works; but this is against a background of wide agreement over the literary canon.

--Furthermore, the institutional theory does not require agreement on literary interpretations, but only agreement on what are considered good and bad arguments (literary judgments).

--Illumination, or profundity, is one standard for literary judgment.

#### VIII.

\*There are different levels to the vocabulary of literary judgment: thematic, descriptive, redescriptive, and aesthetic terms.