

Categories of Literature

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Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art" (1970) is one of the most important and influential papers in twentieth-century aesthetics. It is almost universally taken to refute traditional aesthetic formalism/empiricism, according to which all that matters aesthetically is what is manifest to perception. "Categories" thus played a key role in ushering in the ascendancy of contextualism in the philosophy of art, generating widespread agreement with Walton's conclusion "that (some) facts about the origins of works of art have an *essential* role in criticism" (337).

While the part played by "Categories" in undermining formalism is indisputable, questions remain about the extent to which it supports contextualism. Walton clearly retains formalist presumptions. For instance, he writes, "I do not deny that paintings and sonatas are to be judged solely on what can be seen or heard in them—when they are perceived correctly" (367). Thus contextualists such as Gregory Currie (1989) and David Davies (2003, 2006) argue that Walton does not depart sufficiently from formalism, while Peter Lamarque takes Walton's argument to support his contention that "[w]orks cannot differ in aesthetic character if that difference is not accessible to the senses (or in the case of literature to experience more broadly conceived)" (2010, 126-127).

As Lamarque's parenthetical qualification suggests, most commentators assume that the argument of "Categories" applies to works of literature. Walton himself notes a word of caution: "The aesthetic properties of works of literature are not happily called 'perceptual' ... (The notion of perceiving a work in a category ... is not straightforwardly applicable to literary works)" (335 n.5). However, he goes on to say that although he focuses "on visual and musical works ... the central points I make concerning them hold, with suitable modifications, for novels, plays, and poems as well" (335 n.5). Here I consider what "suitable modifications" are required to extend the account to literature.

The basic argument of "Categories" is familiar. Walton first aims to establish a *psychological thesis*: that how we perceive a work's aesthetic properties turns on which non-aesthetic properties count as standard, contra-standard, or variable for the categories in which we perceive it. He marshals numerous examples to demonstrate that the way we classify a work alters our perception. Most famously, Walton asks us to imagine a society without painting but with an artform called *guernicas*, which share content and design features with Picasso's *Guernica* but are executed in varying forms of bas-relief. Whereas we see *Guernica* as a painting and take the flatness as standard and the figures as variable, members of this society would see it as a *guernica* and take the figures as standard and the flatness as variable. In consequence, while the painting "seems violent, dynamic, vital, disturbing to us ... it would strike them as cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring" (347).

Walton considers and rejects the possibility that aesthetic judgments are category-relative, that Picasso's *Guernica* is dynamic-as-a-painting but lifeless-as-a-*guernica*. Someone who sees *Guernica* as cold and lifeless is wrong, because they have not perceived the work in a *correct* category. Walton's *normative thesis* is that a work's aesthetic properties are those we perceive in it when we perceive it correctly. He goes on to offer several criteria for deciding the categories in which to perceive a work. Among them are historical criteria: we must take into account whether the artist intended the work to fit in a category and/or whether the category was recognized in the artist's society. Because an appeal to these conditions is ineliminable, a work's aesthetic properties ultimately turn on facts about its history.

Though this conclusion represents a rejection of formalism, Walton does not go as far as contextualists who maintain that aesthetic value may turn on facts about a work independently of their effect on us. Instead, his position in “Categories” exemplifies the view David Davies (2006) calls *enlightened empiricism*. Enlightened empiricists maintain (contra formalists) that facts about the origins of an artwork are relevant to aesthetic value, but (contra contextualists) only insofar as they potentially impact our experience. Enlightened empiricists like Lamarque construe *experience* broadly enough to accommodate literature, but as already noted, Walton assumes a narrower conception of sensory perception.

Recent philosophical attempts to explain “perception in a category” are similarly restricted. For example, Dustin Stokes (2014) argues that the best explanation of Walton’s psychological thesis is that perception is *cognitively penetrable*: that is, our beliefs about the artwork’s categorization alter the contents of our perceptual experiences (see also Lamarque 2010, 132). Stokes discusses various ways this could be so, depending on whether perceptual content includes only low-level non-aesthetic properties such as color and shape, or also high-level aesthetic properties. Either way, the mechanism is specific to sensory perception.

Madeleine Ransom (this volume) denies that cognitive penetration is the mechanism that underpins Walton’s psychological thesis; however, the alternative she proposes looks equally unsuited to literature. For Ransom, categorization has its effect through a process of *perceptual learning*, “an enduring change in the perceptual system due to practice or repeated exposure to a perceptual stimulus.” The result is a change in high-level perception, explaining (e.g.) why expert birders can just *see* the difference between species of birds. However, this process is a sensory one and thus difficult to apply to literature.

Ransom rejects the cognitive penetration approach because it sits uneasily with a key feature of “Categories”: that Walton’s argument is restricted to *perceptually distinguishable categories of art* (Ransom p.3; see also Laetz 2010, 291).¹ Walton’s examples include “paintings, cubist paintings, Gothic architecture, classical sonatas, paintings in the style of Cézanne, and music in the style of late Beethoven,” but *only* “if they are interpreted in such a way that membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner” (339).

The focus on perceptually distinguishable categories (henceforth: PD-categories) seems to exclude literature altogether. It may be possible to recognize certain genres of poetry simply by looking and listening, but distinguishing most literary genres requires *comprehension* rather than (or in addition to) sensory perception. Brian Laetz argues that the restriction to PD-categories limits the scope of Walton’s normative thesis; whether a work is a forgery, for instance, cannot make a difference to its aesthetic properties if this is not perceptually distinguishable (2010, 291). The worry is that the same applies to literary categories.

There are thus two challenges in applying Walton’s argument to literature. First, what aspect of reading literature corresponds to “perception in a category”? Second, in what sense are literary categories “perceptually distinguishable”? Addressing either challenge requires identifying a psychological process that plays the role of sensory perception in the literary case.

On Lamarque’s account, the experience of literature includes phenomenology and intentional content (2010, 127). Our attention is intentionally directed on certain literary features of the work, often accompanied by affect (Lamarque 2009, 172). James Shelley argues that we “perceive” (non-sensorily) aesthetic properties in conceptual art and literature so long as “we do not infer them, but ... *they* strike us” (2003, 372). Just as we hear the

¹ I suspect that Stokes’s account of high-level perception is closer to Ransom’s view than she allows, but I set this aside here.

serenity of the music or see the elegance of the painting, we are non-inferentially aware of Oscar Wilde's wit.

Some take this kind of non-inferentiality to be a characteristic of sensory perception. According to the perceptual theory of language comprehension, "fluent speakers have a non-inferential capacity to perceive the content of speech" (Brogaard 2018, 2968). Consider the phenomenology of hearing speech in a language you understand, contrasted with one you do not; or the way Cyrillic text looks to someone before and after learning to read Russian (Peacocke 1992, 89; Siegel 2006, 490). The claim is that meanings themselves are part of perceptual content, processed automatically once the language is learned. Perhaps the same is true of literary features. However, because the perceptual theory is controversial, I remain neutral here.

What matters for present purposes is that there is a corollary to the perception of visual and aural properties in reading literature. The relevant experience is characterized by attention to certain features of a text, which strike us in one way or another as a result of non-inferential, automatic processes akin to, or a species of, perception.

If this is right, experiencing literature *in a category* cannot mean drawing inferences from category information to literary properties. If I judge the narrator of James's *Turn of the Screw* reliable because I classify it as a ghost story, or treat the baby recipes in Swift's "A Modest Proposal" as non-serious because I know the essay is satirical, categorization does not have the appropriate effect. Rather, classification must play a causal role in my being struck by the eeriness of James's story or the humor of Swift's essay.

Elsewhere I have proposed that reading in a category involves the sub-conscious adoption of what psychologists call a *reading* or *encoding strategy*, a way of compensating for limits on working memory capacity by prioritizing attention on certain features of a text rather than others (Friend 2012, 202). We cannot give equal attention to every word or detail as we read, so instead we strategically focus on (for instance) what matters to the protagonist or causally significant events. The information that is prioritized is encoded in memory and deployed in further interpretation.

I suggest that classification generates expectations about which features of a text count as standard, variable, or contra-standard, and this prompts us, automatically and non-inferentially, to pay more attention to some of these features than others. For example, consider the following passage:

It was no good. Granville Sharp could not go on as before. The undeniable fact was that he had no stomach for the fight. ... [T]o think that it had been his hand that had supplied the bayonets puncturing American breasts at Bunker Hill, or that had delivered the grenades that had put the houses of Charles Town to the torch – why, his conscience revolted at it.

If one reads this passage *as fiction*, the "inside views" will count as standard, and readers will not question how the author knows what Granville Sharp is thinking. The contrary is true if one reads it *as nonfiction*. As it happens, the excerpt is from Simon Schama's nonfiction *Rough Crossings* (Schama 2009, 111). The classification explains why Schama has been praised for "plunging us into the very centre of the action" (Wilson 2005) by using techniques that would elicit little attention in fiction. One need not have the concept *free indirect discourse* to recognize that the inside views of Sharp's thoughts are unusual for nonfiction; one need only be familiar with other works in that category for this feature to

strike one as noteworthy (compare Walton 341). This is (akin to) the process of perceptual learning described by Ransom.²

The next question is how to make sense of experientially distinguishable categories of literature. Reformulating Walton's criterion, such categories would be determined solely by features that non-inferentially strike a reader when a work is experienced in the normal manner. It is not entirely clear how to interpret this criterion, even applied to visual and aural artworks. For example, is *painting* a PD-category? Criticizing Walton, Nick Zangwill contends that it is not: "what *makes* something a painting is, in part, the artist's intention" (2000, 479). One might think that because *Guernica* could be either a painting or a *guernica*, the only way to tell is by appeal to historical considerations. If so, the number of PD-categories will be vanishingly small.

I believe that this restrictive interpretation is mistaken. For ordinary viewers experiencing them in the usual way, paintings are perceptually distinguishable—as would *guernicas* be if there were any such category. After all, paintings are typically flat, painted surfaces with variable pictorial contents, whereas *guernicas* are bas-reliefs with standard contents and variable depths and textures. Where a work could fit into either of these PD-categories, historical factors decide which is "aesthetically active" (Laetz 2010, 295).

We can make a parallel point about a literary example Walton discusses elsewhere. He writes that his account in "Categories" helps to

make sense of the claim in Jorge Luis Borges' Story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," ... that although "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical," Menard's, written (not copied) by a different author in a different century, is "more subtle" and "almost infinitely richer." (Walton 1973, 268)

Cervantes's and Menard's works each fit into multiple categories, for instance (works in the style of) *Spanish Golden Age satire* for Cervantes and *postmodern novel* for Menard.³ Although the texts are identical, this does not prevent the categories from being experientially distinguishable. For example, postmodern novels are not typically written in early modern Spanish.

In less artificial cases, experiential distinguishability looks more straightforward. If a text begins "Once upon a time" and narrates events involving magic, readers will take it as a fairy tale. An expository text explaining the causes of past events with numerous footnotes will be read as academic history. Now, one could discover that something that appeared to be academic history was something else, say an elaborate experimental fiction. Similarly, one could discover that something that appeared to be a painting was, instead, a spare canvas grounded in red lead (Danto 1981, 2). Walton's claim is not ontological but epistemological, and no plausible epistemic claim about experience requires infallibility.

Why does Walton restrict his argument to PD-categories? One reason is his opposition: If the formalist is to be persuaded, the argument must take place in her territory, within the domain of the perceptually manifest. To smuggle in historical considerations whose relevance is precisely what is at issue would be to beg the question (cf. Davies, this volume). Another reason is that it is only when we can perceptually distinguish a category that we are struck by its *gestalt*, rather than inferring aesthetic properties from background knowledge.

² Brogaard (2018, 2969) similarly argues that learning a language is a form of perceptual learning.

³ I am inclined to drop the qualification *in the style of*; if we learn to distinguish categories via genuine instances, we are tracking genuine kinds (see Ransom, this volume).

It cannot be denied that sometimes we rely on information external to the work to recognize a category. And Walton allows this as one of the “*causes* of our perceiving works in certain categories,” as when we are told in advance that a Cézanne painting is French Impressionist (342). However, such information merely prompts the appropriate *gestalt*; it would fail to produce the right effect if we were not already familiar with works in the category. The *guernica* and Menard examples are misleading in this respect, since we have no background familiarity with purely hypothetical categories (Ransom, this volume).

They are also misleading insofar as they turn on stark categorial differences. Actual artworks can be experienced within multiple categories which are not mutually exclusive. For instance, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* can be read as a fantasy adventure story, a political/social satire, and a satire on contemporary travel journals. Consider this description of how the promotion of courtiers is determined in Lilliput:

When a great office is vacant, ... five or six of those candidates petition the emperor to entertain his majesty and the court with a dance on the rope; and whoever jumps the highest, without falling, succeeds in the office. (Swift 1980, 53-54)

Read as part of a fantasy travel adventure, this will seem yet another exotic ritual; detailing unusual customs is standard for the genre. But the passage will strike readers who are sufficiently familiar with the relevant sort of satire as (in addition) a clever, biting portrayal of political intrigue. The satire would have been transparent to its original audience, whereas readers today rely on more explicit cues. Still, however they are prompted to read the work in that category, they will expect apparently innocent descriptions to double as incisive commentary. As a result, they are likely to be struck by the humor.

Such examples indicate that literary categorization makes an experiential difference that is at least analogous to the perceptual effects delineated in “Categories.” Much more work needs to be done in understanding how categorization guides patterns of attention in reading; but that is a project for another day.⁴

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