

# The Thought of Literature

Notes to contemporary fictions



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## Certificate of original authorship

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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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# Abstract

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This dissertation begins by describing the contemporary moment in letters as one marked by ambiguity and blockage: at the same time as the line between creative and critical writing has become blurry, anxieties about the meaning and vocation of literature have become acute. It then identifies a group of authors who respond to this moment in a highly self-conscious way: among others, Don DeLillo, J.M. Coetzee, Ben Lerner, Karl Ove Knausgaard, John D'Agata, and David Shields. While diverse in approach, these authors are united by their insistence on the cognitive purview and the critical vocation of literature. As a heuristic for thinking about their recent works, I propose the generic category of the 'post-fictional essay'. Yet it is a category that I admit is problematic. Such works are notable, I argue, precisely for a thinking of thisaporetic moment, and thus for the pressure they place upon our critical and experiential vocabularies; they call on critical activity to account for, indeed to transform, itself. Rather than proceeding with a detailed literary-critical account of these works, then, I offer an analysis of some of the concepts and categories in which post-fictional essays, if such existed, might be said to intervene, and of the epistemic ambiguities that might be said to occasion them. This dissertation comprises three main sections, each of which elaborates and problematises an entrenched opposition: 'Literature and Philosophy', 'Truth and Fiction', 'Novel and Essay'. Respectively, these sections draw primarily on the resources of Frankfurt School critical theory, reader response theory, and genre studies. The title of this work—*The Thought of Literature*—describes a tripartite preoccupation that informs the investigation throughout: I am concerned with questions, first, about the cognitive content of literature; second, about literature as a distinctive modality of cognition; and third, about literature as an institutional, epistemic and generic category. My central question is: *What is the thought of literature?* Since this dissertation could not extricate itself from the ambiguous moment it seeks to describe, the complexity of the answer I assay is partly reflected in this work's own paratactic mode of presentation.