

Traditional literary interpretation versus subversive interpretation

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Abstract. I present some objections to traditional literary interpretation and consider subversive interpretation as a solution to these problems. Subversive interpretation may seem more scientific and more democratic than traditional interpretation, but it is open to doubt that it is more democratic.

Literary criticism consists of the interpretation and evaluation of literature. In this paper, I present a debate between two approaches to the interpretive side of literary criticism, which I refer to as traditional literary interpretation and subversive interpretation. This debate is closely connected to the debate between John Searle and Jacques Derrida. From 1983 onwards, the foundations of literary criticism are an explicit topic of discussion within this debate. I am tempted to say that the debate is of enduring significance for literary critics, and many others interested in the arts, because Searle defends traditional literary interpretation whereas Derrida defends subversive interpretation. But there may be subtle differences between Searle's proposals and traditional literary interpretation. There are such differences regarding Derridean and subversive interpretation.¹ I am going to pass over these subtle differences below. But before I explain traditional literary interpretation and compare it with subversive interpretation, it is useful to register some points made in this debate.

¹ See Norris 1987: 19 for a description of how Derrida often interprets a text.

Two assumptions. In 1983, Searle published an article entitled “The Word Turned Upside Down” in the *New York Review of Books*. There he is concerned about the influence of Derrida on literary criticism and literary theory: theoretical work that seeks to provide a philosophical foundation for the pursuit of literary criticism. Searle identifies two assumptions of literary critics influenced by Derrida. It is these assumptions that Searle thinks are leading them to reject a more traditional approach to literary interpretation in favour of Derrida’s radical techniques.

What are the assumptions? One assumption is that, for any legitimate category, something either falls under that category or it does not.² For example, a literary work is either a work of fiction or it is not. It may be that, for some works, we do not know whether they are fiction or non-fiction. We are not aware of criteria that would resolve the issue. Nevertheless, according to the assumption, if the category of fiction is legitimate, this is just a situation in which the work belongs under the category of fiction or it does not, but we do not know where to place it and perhaps can never know. Against the assumption, Searle proposes that we should allow for some cases which are indeterminate by their very nature.³

Derrida acknowledges that he makes the assumption that Searle attributes to him. It is worth quoting what Derrida says:

I confirm it: for me, from the point of view of theory and of the concept, “unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction.” Searle is entirely right, for once, in attributing this “assumption”

² 1983: 78. According to another reading of the assumption, it is that for any legitimate concept there must be a set of necessary and sufficient conditions which defines that concept. Tomáš Koblížek seems to read the assumption in this way and suggests that this reading is compatible with cases that are indeterminate by nature (2012: 163-164). But I am not sure that Derrida reads the assumption in Koblížek’s way (1988: 120, third sentence); and, anyway, Searle would probably reject the assumption on this reading as well.

³ 1983: 78.

to me... he must feel rather isolated in the community of philosophers and scholars.⁴

Derrida also asserts that there is no option but to rely on the assumption. He says:

It is impossible or illegitimate to form a philosophical concept outside this logic of all or nothing.⁵

However, Derrida's claims about what is uncommon and about what kind of logic cannot be dispensed with are very questionable. In an article from 1994, Searle responds that there is nothing uncommon about rejecting the assumption. He writes:

Indeed, in addition to examinations of the problem of vagueness, there have been quite extensive discussions of family resemblance, open texture, underdetermination and indeterminacy. There has even developed a booming industry of fuzzy logic whose aim is to give a precise logic to vagueness.⁶

It seems to me that Derrida peaks early in their long debate, while Searle's best moments are years later. In 1977, Derrida accused Searle of gross misinterpretation of his work.⁷ But by later correctly identifying the assumption, Searle makes a major contribution to understanding Derrida's thinking. Beyond this contribution, Searle is right that the assumption is open to question. Literary critics and theorists who accept Derrida's arguments must now ask whether they should do so, given the reliance on this questionable assumption.

The second assumption Searle identifies depends on the first. It is that, for any legitimate category, there needs to be a mechanical procedure for answering the question of whether something belongs under that category or not: a set of instructions one can follow

⁴ 1988: 126.

⁵ 1988: 117.

⁶ 1994: 638.

⁷ See 1988: 47, §m.

which leads to the correct answer.⁸ Searle associates the two assumptions with logical positivism, a movement within early and mid-twentieth century philosophy which was inspired by the successes of the natural sciences.⁹ Derridean literary critics may seem very different from logical positivists, but according to Searle this is a superficial appearance and beneath the surface lie positivist assumptions. I believe that Searle is right to point to the influence of a certain conception of what it is to be scientific. However, a similar debate about the future of academic literary criticism can survive what Searle says against the two assumptions, though rejecting them does make a significant difference to it. That similar debate is between traditional literary interpretation and subversive interpretation.¹⁰ Note that below I focus literary criticism produced as part of academic research, because in this context it seems more reasonable to demand justifications for each controversial claim and to apply what one takes to be the requirements of science when evaluating justifications.

Traditional literary interpretation. What is traditional literary interpretation? To understand how I shall use this term, it is useful to begin with an example of a literary critic commenting on a text. Here is an example where a critic is commenting on a character from a Shakespeare play:

The greatness of Lady Macbeth lies almost wholly in courage and force of will. It is an error to regard her as remarkable on the intellectual side. In acting a part she shows immense self-control but not much skill. Whatever may be thought of the plan of attributing the murder of Duncan to the chamberlains, to

⁸ 1983: 78.

⁹ 1983: 78.

¹⁰ This way of capturing the debate may give the misleading impression that there are no other options or that there was only traditional literary interpretation until subversive interpretation came along. For some other options, see Eagleton 1996.

lay their bloody daggers on their pillows... was a mistake which can be accounted for only by the excitement of the moment.¹¹

If this critic were faced with a person who does not accept these claims, what could he say? One thing he might do is offer more evidence for the claims. However, what if, even after offering evidence, the person does not accept these claims?

There are various reasons for why a person might not accept these claims. In one kind of case, the literary critic would probably end up having thoughts along the following lines: “Some people are clueless when it comes to understanding others. They miss hints, unwritten rules, irony and emotional subtleties. Furthermore, they are a bad judge of character and motivation. Some people are exceptionally good at perceiving or judging these things. There are many people who lie in-between the extremes. To see that the claims I have made are true, one must not be towards the lower extreme. One needs a certain amount of what we can call social intuition.”

The word “see” is not being used above in the sense of visually experience, but it is understandable for the critic to compare poor intuition here to an impairment to a sensory organ.¹² A natural scientist often depends on the ability to see in order to establish their conclusions. They rely on their own ability and they appeal to the same ability in others to double-check their results. Analogously, the literary critic depends on social intuition.

Those who pursue traditional literary interpretation rely on good social intuition to understand literary works. They draw upon this intuition when trying to understand various phenomena of interest to literary criticism, such as qualities of a character or author.

¹¹ Bradley 1905: 371.

¹² In relation to various subject areas, philosophers consider the proposal that knowledge in that area is achieved by relying on a capacity for intuition, a capacity that is compared to a capacity for sensory perception. For example, concerning moral knowledge, W.D.Ross tells us that “The moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics, just as sense perceptions are the data of science.” (1930: 41)

Furthermore, they address audiences as if they have good social intuition as well. It is presumed that audiences are not like the clueless person described above. The traditional interpreter makes claims which they present as truths. They sometimes offer evidence for these claims. But if faced with an audience member who seems to have poor social intuition, they may well think, “Even if I provide evidence to this person, it is impossible to get them to see that these claims are true, because they lack the appropriate level of intuition.” As I understand traditional literary interpretation, it is committed to this way of thinking for at least some claims, when faced with some individuals. This commitment is what defines it.¹³

It is difficult to find an example of literary criticism that seems traditional and is also as explicit about its philosophical commitments as I have been when characterizing traditional literary interpretation. These critics proceed without considering how some people would react – people who would, rightly or wrongly, be regarded by many as socially clueless. But it is very plausible that, if literary critics from the early twentieth century and before¹⁴ were forced to defend the foundations of their practice, these commitments would be made explicit.

Objections and responses. In this section, I shall present two objections to traditional literary interpretation. The first objection is that any discipline should try to properly justify its claims and appealing to social intuition does not count as a proper justification. The scientist can appeal to what is observed through the senses as part of producing proper

¹³ In the next sentence, I write of a plurality of commitments. This is partly because to present this commitment, one has to start by presenting other commitments, which this one presupposes.

¹⁴ The pre-twentieth century commentary on English literature that I have read fits well with traditional literary criticism. Subversive interpretation seems both very recent and as if it might have existed in an ancient cult, so the term “traditional literary interpretation” may not be ideal. I thought about using “traditional humanist literary interpretation,” but it was too long.

justifications, but the traditional interpreter cannot appeal to what is detected through social intuition. Traditional literary interpretation is therefore unscientific.

The second objection is that we do not have sufficient reason to think that members of the community of literary critics have good social intuition. Have there been any tests to establish that its existence? A person may believe that some people have much better social intuition than some others and they may believe that they are one such person, but these beliefs might well be false. In the absence of tests, this is another way in which traditional interpretation is unscientific.

Given these objections, traditional literary interpretation is vulnerable to attack, in societies where it is normal to take the natural sciences as examples of successful disciplines, and not the humanities. A response to this line of attack is to seek the support of another discipline, such as psychology or a social science. The traditional literary interpreter can rely on claims about human psychology or behaviour that are justified by one or more of these disciplines, rather than mere intuition. This amounts to the evolution of traditional literary interpretation into something else, but something that is a recognizable successor to it. Another response is to seek “companions in guilt.”¹⁵ For example, someone might argue that, if one looks at research in the natural sciences, it also involves reliance on intuitions of some kind and cannot easily proceed without such intuitions. So the difference between traditional literary interpretation and science is smaller than these objections suggest.

At present, I cannot see that the objections above depend on the assumptions that Searle identifies. But rejecting the assumptions provides a novel way of defending traditional literary interpretation. If one accepts that there are indeterminate cases, then there seems no

¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, the expression “companions in guilt,” when used to identify a response to philosophical objections, comes from J.L. Mackie’s inquiry into the objectivity of values (1977: 27).

reason for why one should not accept this in relation to the category of being scientific. There can be borderline cases, where it is indeterminate whether something is scientific or not. What Searle could say is that those who favour traditional literary interpretation should try to occupy this indeterminate space. That will probably mean cutting out some of its claims, but keeping others, for instance that Lady Macbeth shows immense self-control in pursuing her ambitions but not much skill in figuring out how best to achieve them. (I have not read the bloody tragedy for many years, to be sure that this is good example.) However, there is a risk involved with taking this path. It depends on universities showing a tolerance for discourses that occupy this indeterminate space.

Subversive interpretation. A literary critic who accepts the objections presented above may well think that the only statements available to them about works of literature are obvious ones, which are not worth making anyway. “What interesting things can I say about literary works, given these objections?” it makes sense for them to wonder. Subversive interpretation is an answer. Subversive interpretation involves showing that even some seemingly obvious statements about literary works are not available. On the understanding that I am working with here, what the subversive interpreter does is this: they take claims about a work of literature that traditional interpreters would regard as beyond reasonable doubt and show that there is a conflicting interpretation which fits equally well with the textual evidence.¹⁶ They do not say that one of these interpretations is correct. Rather the evidence is neutral between both. This is meant to be an interesting contribution.

¹⁶ This approach is similar to, or simply the result of, applying the thesis that theory is underdetermined by data to the interpretation of literary texts. The thesis is associated with Pierre Duhem and W.V. Quine. For an explanation of this thesis, see English 1973: 453.

To illustrate this approach, here is an orthodox interpretation of some occurrences in Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*: "Oedipus aims to find out who killed Laertes, the former King of Thebes. What he discovers is so troubling that his wife ends up killing herself and he responds by blinding himself." I presume most readers of the play would regard this as a statement of the obvious. (Quite possibly, they would not even count it as an interpretation, because they regard an interpretation as applying to material which is not obvious. But beliefs about what is obvious are precisely what the subversive interpreter calls into question.) Imagine that a subversive interpreter says that the evidence available to us provides just as much support for the following interpretation: "Oedipus knew what he was going to find all along. He pursued the inquiry because he wanted to drive his wife to suicide and was looking for a pretext to engage in extreme self-harm." In the play, Oedipus is aware of a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. He inquires into the death of an older man, while being married to a woman old enough to be his mother. So this interpretation has some initial plausibility. Nevertheless, I doubt that the textual evidence provides as much support for this example interpretation as it does for the orthodox interpretation. If we pretend for a moment that it does, the example illustrates the idea of a subversive interpretation.

The subversive interpreter is opposed to appealing to intuition to reveal the qualities of literary works. If readers use their intuition, they are likely to accept orthodox interpretations and overlook subversive ones. Furthermore, the subversive interpreter does not usually make the kind of quality attributions that the traditional interpreter does. For example, if a traditional interpreter asserts that a character's problems stem from a certain feature of themselves, the subversive interpreter does not assert that the character's problems stem from others. If a traditional interpreter asserts that an author has a pessimistic view of life, the subversive interpreter does not assert that the author is an optimist. Rather they deny

that there is a compelling reason to regard the orthodox interpretation as correct because there is an alternative interpretation available that fits equally well with the evidence.

Almost by definition, a successful subversive interpretation has a strong claim to being scientific. Subversive interpretation also shows how some kind of literary criticism might survive in conditions that are extremely hostile to literary criticism – a society where the standards applying to all empirical research are derived from a certain conception of scientific research, one which requires us to minimize the role of intuition when justifying a claim. Furthermore, subversive interpretation does not require that literary critics draw upon psychological or social science research, or take up controversial stances about natural science disciplines, or depend on a university showing tolerance for research on the border between science and non-science. The solution allows literary critics to achieve a high degree of autonomy.

But a successful subversive interpretation is very difficult to pull off. It requires considerable ingenuity. If a literary critic can only gain employment within a university by being able to produce successful instances of subversive interpretation, it seems that the discipline will be quite small, in terms of the number of academic members involved. The solution we are considering is just not an option for most readers and this may well lead some literary critics to seek out other solutions.

A small community of subversive interpreters can point to other small highly-skilled fields, in defence of their exclusivity. Perhaps the community can grow larger by having a few proposed subversive interpretations and much discussion of whether they work or, if not, what is wrong with them. The discussion may often not be conducted by those who propose the interpretations. However, I believe that a lot of what interests readers in literature is not in this direction. Again this may well lead some literary critics to seek out other solutions.

Liberal democratic values. By rejecting the assumptions that Searle does, we open up a way of defending traditional literary interpretation; but I cannot see that rejecting them will end the debate between traditional and subversive interpretation. There is no ideal solution to the objections made against traditional interpretation. The different proposals come with different benefits and costs.

It is worth noting that in a society in which liberal-democratic values are dominant, traditional literary interpretation may be attacked from a different angle: for not being compatible with these values. One objection is that traditional literary interpretation is undemocratic, because it addresses itself to individuals who supposedly have a certain level of intuition, excluding others, but there are no tests to establish that these others lack the appropriate capacity.¹⁷ In a democratic society, research done within a state-funded university should not say or imply to some people, “You cannot see that these claims are true, because you lack the appropriate capacity,” unless there is a test. A mathematician can say this to a non-mathematician, but not a literary critic to a supposedly clueless person.

Another objection is that traditional literary interpretation is a threat to liberal values, because there is a significant risk that many of our intuitions are simply false prejudices. For example, a person may have the intuition that women in general have quality X when only slightly more than half of women have this quality. These intuitions can end up negatively affecting people’s lives.

¹⁷ Regarding the growth of literary theory since the 1960s, Terry Eagleton tells us, “What is truly elitist in literary studies is the idea that works of literature can only be appreciated by those with a particular sort of cultural breeding... Theory was a way of emancipating literary works from the stranglehold of a ‘civilized sensibility’, and throwing them open to a kind of analysis in which, in principle at least, anyone could participate.” (1996: viii) Note that the traditional literary interpreter, as I have presented them, does not say that the social intuition used in interpreting texts is the result of an upbringing within a specific class.

How does subversive interpretation fare in relation to liberal-democratic values? On the one hand, it seems that the subversive interpreter does not ever have to make statements along the lines of “I know what is really going on with this character or situation because I have better intuition than you.” They also avoid the risk of asserting prejudices that threaten the project of realizing liberal-democratic values. But the difficulty of achieving successful subversive interpretations, and the fact that much of what interests readers is not in this direction, mean that it cannot ever feel like a fully satisfactory solution, from the point of view of this project.

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