

INTERPRETATION, LITERATURE & MEANING SCEPTICISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

I here propose to ask an unusual question and then to trace a few of the consequences of answering it one way or another. The question, put crudely at first mention, is what might it mean to be a *meaning sceptic* in respect to literature. How, that is, can we make sense of a generalized doubt concerning our access to the meanings of a literary work? Scepticism, in this particular sense, has as its object not the conviction that a literary work bears a meaning but the idea that we can ever be assured that we have come into possession of it. I should be clear that I will not be defending scepticism in respect to literary meaning so much as exploring the conditions under which it is even minimally intelligible. What kind of thing must a literary work *be* if it can mean something perhaps even radically other than what competent and good-faith interpreters think it means? And what might this tell us about the basic kinds of meanings literary works bear and the nature of the interpretative activities that struggle to make them available?¹

I will identify two basic ways of being such a sceptic. The first animates the sceptical doubt by considering our access to meaning-relevant information that is external to a literary work; the other, our access to the meanings apparently wholly internal to a work. In the first case, scepticism gets afoot by considering the limits of our knowledge of the context of literary production and thus of our ability to see how this context endows a work with critically significant forms of aboutness. In the second case, the sceptical doubt is brought to life by considering the limits of, as it were, self-knowledge and thus the grounds of our assurance that *we* are ever such to be able to make full interpretive sense of a literary work. I hope to show that this discussion should be of interest even to those who have little patience for sceptical arguments. It provides a novel way of thinking about many of the concerns that have always been central to debates on interpretation: concerns, especially, about when it is, and is not, interesting to say that the meaning of a literary work is autonomous, or that it is ‘constructed’ rather than ‘discovered’, ‘imputed’ to rather than ‘uncovered’ in a literary work.² And it will ultimately leave us with provocative question: if we cannot dismiss the

¹ For the sense of scepticism and kindred issues I employ here, I am especially indebted to Koethe, John. *Scepticism, Knowledge, and Forms of Reasoning*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005; Kirk, Robert. *Relativism and Reality: A Contemporary Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1999; Williamson, Timothy. *Knowledge and Its Limits*.

² For concise definitions of these and like terms central to the debate on interpretation, see the Introduction to

kinds of epistemic and metaphysical concerns that sustain sceptical doubts about literary meaning, are we then obliged to countenance a kind of *fictionalism* about critical discourse itself?³

II. SCEPTICS & SCHOLARS

It might be the case that only philosophers call the phenomenon I am interested in ‘scepticism’, but literature endlessly explores it and has been doing since time immemorial. In fact, while what philosophy will eventually call scepticism was first articulated in 4th century Athens, it was brought to life not in the Agora but the City Dionysia, that is, on the stage and in an essentially dramatic context. It was Sophocles and not Socrates who first hit upon the possibility of the kind of generalized doubt we now call scepticism. And he did this, of course, in *Oedipus The King*. Part of the horror Oedipus’s tragedy is intended to provoke in us extends well beyond the idea that we cannot escape fate and that its plans for us are less than flattering. The great philosophical achievement of the drama is that it makes conceivable that the truth of each of our existences might be radically other than we think it is. And it shows us this in respect to the things we would seem to have the best chance of knowing: our loved ones, our friends, as well as the basic ‘truths’ of our lives, our histories, and our selves. Of all the things in the world, these are the items with which we take ourselves to have achieved the greatest degree of epistemic intimacy, those bits of the world we feel⁴ to be most perfectly revealed to us because of their sheer presence in our lives. What Oedipus discovers, recall, is that his wife is in fact his mother, his children his brothers and sisters, and that he is the very murderer for whom he is searching. The question this provokes is, naturally, *if he can’t know any of that, then what can he know?* And it is of course the same question for thoughtful members of audience. For if Sophocles has rendered intelligible that can one be radically and horribly mistaken about those items in the world with which we seem to enjoy such epistemic intimacy, it suddenly becomes intelligible to wonder the very same thing about our existence and our epistemic situation. It might just be a wonder, as scepticism itself perhaps just is. But the wonder is immensely productive, in both drama and philosophy.

In this way Sophocles, like every good writer after him, dismantles that wall that runs between fiction and life and allows the point of his story to become a point about life in general. If Sophocles succeeded in rendering this possibility intelligible, if he succeeded in making imaginable that we might be radically mistaken about the basic truths of our existence—that our children and spouses are just that—then he at least succeeded in showing us one way in which we can imagine being in principle wrong about just about anything. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* is, from a literary and humanistic perspective, among the most despairing solutions philosophy has ever produced: who cares that I can know that I exist; I

Krausz, Michael (ed). *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?* University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002.

³ I trust this makes it clear that I am using the term ‘interpretation’ in a non-technical and everyday sense. It designates, in the case of literature, the activity of rendering explicit the meanings of a work whereas ‘meanings’ are taken to designate features of its aboutness: its subject matter, point, theme, thesis (if such it possesses), and so on. Below I define two types of interpretations I think are especially central.

⁴ I say “feel” because the notion of epistemic intimacy here designates an impression and not a theory. It is the sense—often for good, if always defeasible, reasons—that our cognitive access to certain items in the world is privileged, usually owing to their familiarity and central place in our lives. It is the sense of nearly perfect cognitive familiarity we have in respect to, in standard cases, certain other people, though if my argument is sound, we have it in respect to certain artworks, too.

want to know that others exist, and are more or less as I take them to be, especially those I love. Even if it is hugely improbable that those I love are otherwise than I think they are, the mere possibility that they are can burden our connection to them with a sense of distance and separateness. A poet will call this a feeling of estangement; a philosopher will describe it as the realization that certainty is something we will always fall a step short of achieving.

To get my sceptical question in regard to literary meaning on its feet, let me offer one more idea. Think of a strange creature called the Ideal Milton Scholar. That is, think of an academic who has dedicated her life to understanding, say, *Paradise Lost*, and grant that such a scholar's perpetual laboring over the poem will produce the greatest degree of epistemic intimacy an actual human can have with an actual work of art.⁵ In addition to tremendous archival research, requisite mastery of the history of Christianity and the Anglican lens through which Milton viewed it, our imagined scholar has mastered virtually every theory philosophy and literary studies have produced for conquering the meaning of a work, having read *Paradise Lose* as a formalist, a structuralist, an historicist, a Marxist, even as a feminist and a postcolonialist (perhaps Milton's Satan can be read as the first great colonizer, even if only marginally successful). In short, imagine someone who has done virtually all one can be expected to do to make a literary work's meaning available to understanding; that she has fulfilled *whatever* practical conditions we set forth as required for justifying a claim to know a literary work and its meaning. Now just think of meaning scepticism in respect to literature as the idea that, despite all of her labor, it is intelligible to say that the ideal scholar might be wrong about *Paradise Lost's* meaning: that she is in error about its very aboutness. Since we are considering an idealized scholar, the intelligibility of a doubt as to whether her best interpretation is correct is effectively tantamount to a generalized sceptical doubt. Its form would be of the standard sceptical sort: *as far as we know, interpretations never succeed in yielding the meaning of a literary work, since it is always conceivable that interpretations produced in even ideal circumstances err*. Is this sound?

III. INTENTIONS & ARCHIVES

Surely it is minimally intelligible that our ideal Milton scholar might get *Paradise Lost* wrong, that her best interpretation of it misconstrues it in critically significant ways. It is easy enough, after all, simply to suppose that this could be the case. And this doubt is intelligible without even considering an actual interpretative claim, which is telling. But it is also troubling that we find it so. A literary work, unlike a black hole or an event far off in the past, would seem in principle capable of being made more or less perfectly available to us. What could remain hidden from the ideal scholar if she understands the language of the text and the culture from which the work emanated? Presumably the ideal scholar can tell us that the point of Book 1 is to document Satan's fall; of Book 9, ours. The critic can say, of every stanza, what it is 'about' in the sense that she can accurately paraphrase its semantic and apparent thematic content. Indeed, each book of *Paradise Lost* begins with a statement of its argument, and thus the critic has tremendous guidance. So what are these secrets that could remain hidden even from the ideal scholar?

⁵ I trust this makes it clear that I have no interest in the knowledge a supercomputer, Laplace's Demon, or an entity possessed of God's-eye view of the cosmos might achieve of a work. Scepticism provides a theory of the *limits of human knowledge*; and while stipulating creatures who have infallible access to material and information actual humans do not might tell us much about what knowledge requires, it clearly tells us little about the epistemic limits the sceptic wishes to explore.

First things first, if a sceptical doubt is coherent here, it is clear that we must be able to conceive of at least certain kinds of meaning literary works bear as strongly independent of interpretation. There must be, that is, interpretation-independent literary meaning. Literary scepticism, in this respect, appears to depend on a traditional *realist* conception of at least certain forms of literary meaning: that meaning is, if not wholly mind-independent, then independent of the mind of any particular reader or interpreter (with one possible exception, to be mentioned in a moment). If the traditional philosophical idea that reality might be radically other, or at least just other, than we take it to be, assumes that there is a way reality is apart from our construals of it, meaning scepticism, of the sort I am after, would appear to require much the same.

This allows us to dismiss as irrelevant a position that was *au courant* in the 1980s and 1990s but has fortunately largely been retired. It is a view to be found, in one way or another, in Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Roland Barth, and Jacques Derrida. It is the idea of a ‘bare text.’ Here is Rorty’s expression of the idea:

The coherence of [a] . . .text is. . . no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks or noises—some way of describing those marks or noises which relates them to some other things we are interested in talking about. . . This coherence is neither internal nor external to anything: it is just a function of has been said so far about those marks.⁶

Now there is clearly a kind of sceptical view here, but it is not of the sort relevant to the issues I am exploring. The ‘doubt’ it expresses is in fact the opposite of ours: the ‘bare text’ view of literature asks us to imagine the literary works we know and love to be in a sense constituted by interpretations of them, but it does so by denying the very notion that there is any independence of literary meaning from interpretation in the first place. As conceived apart from a community of interpreters, we should not imagine a literary work to be inscribed with any coherence at all but rather as a mere arrangement of symbols awaiting one to come and beat sense and a structure out of them. I suspect we have as much of a chance of encountering a genuine bare text as we do of encountering the fabled man without qualities, but I do not wish to belabor the point. What is important to see is that the idea of a bare text—and all kindred ways of doubting that meaning really inheres in texts—is irrelevant to the project of this study. If one imagines a text to be genuinely bare prior to an interpretation, there is no intelligible way of articulating potential discordance between what a text means and what we say it means, and thus there is nothing to ground the kind of sceptical doubt I am exploring.

Consider a stanza from Louis Zukofsky’s *Catullus* (1958-1960). It may at first appear akin to a bare Rortian text, but on reflection something interesting will appear, something that will lead us in the direction of at least one conception of literary meaning that will explain how literary work can keep secrets from their interpreters.

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Newly say dickered my love air my own would marry
me all

⁶ As quoted in Lamarque, Peter. *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 157. I am here indebted to Lamarque’s discussion of this view.

whom but me, none see say Jupiter if she petted.
 Dickered: said my love air could be o could dickered a
 man too
 in wind o wet rapid a scribble reported in water⁷

If some part of us thinks this poem approximates as bare text, it would be the crude part of us that thinks we have nothing deserving of the term meaning when we have language that does not culminate in a proposition, description, or a point of some sort. And note that we of course can begin to find kinds of meaning here, if not quite those kinds. First, a quick trip to the library—or, better yet, to Google—will tell me something important about *Catullus*, namely, that the poem has a quite straightforward project, is endowed with a distinct purpose, and so in very concrete terms admits of a kind of *artistic* aboutness, which places us firmly in the realm of meaning. *Catullus* is an attempt at transliteration, rather than translation, of the original Latin. Zukofsky rendered in English the sound, but not the sense, of Catullus' lyric. And with this in mind I can begin to speak about the nature of the poem and its point: of what it is *about*. I might claim, for example, that part of the poem's point is to show us that the production of sound and not the production of sense is sufficient for poetry; that a poem may offer aural rather than cognitive delight and still bear significant aesthetic fruit (though the last line of the stanza does seem concerned with 'cognition,' albeit delivered through intense figuration). Poetry, of course, has always struck those in the know as a deeply musical art. The point is, by looking at facts that underwrite the creation of this poem, we gain access to facts that allow us to ascribe to a poem a kind of determinacy: a project, a point, a purpose. They explain how the poem is, despite its chaotic language, attempting to *say* something (about, for example, the nature of poetry). If this is so, the poem is in possession of communicative content and hence clearly satisfies the conditions for bearing meaning: for *being* a meaningful object.

This brief example helps bring to mind something important, namely, all those things that are external to a literary work but which seem necessary for understanding it. The most obvious example of such external material are *creative intentions* that may not be manifest in a work yet which are at times essential for understanding it. It is common, in the philosophy of language, to argue that intentions can often be crucial for understanding what one is doing with one's words, and the idea is that the same is often true when trying to understand what authors do with their works. Take the following example of a conversation of sorts. I am in a relationship and I meet my partner to discuss the possibility of moving in together. We are at the point, I say, that we either make it serious or call it off. I meet her (or him, or whatever you want to imagine) for a coffee and I find myself utterly perplexed as to why she spends five minutes telling me about her fear of heights, at the end of which she simply gets up and leaves. Is she implying that she feels me be a precipice over which she can only fall? That her love for me is so intoxicating she feels dizzy but unbalanced and perhaps little a nauseous? Or was she just telling me about her fear of heights? I will naturally wish to know *why* she told me the story if I am to understand its point, what it is *about*, indeed if I am to understand what her story is attempting to communicate to me. But as with friends and their stories, so with authors and their stories. We often need to understand what authors intend to say with their works to understand their literary creations.⁸ I refine this idea in a moment, hopefully in a way that will assuage the worries of all those theorists and philosophers who dislike talk of

⁷ Zukofsky, Louis. *Selected Poems*. ed. Charles Bernstein, New York: Library of America, 2006, p. 51.

⁸ The most exhaustive discussion of the role of intention in the creation and interpretation of art is Livingston, Paisley. *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

authors and their intentions. For the moment, however, let's follow the idea.

The idea of an authorial intention⁹ as partly determinative of kinds of literary meaning—I will define the kinds in the next section—clearly gives us one way to color in the picture that a work might be endowed with kinds of meaning independent of whatever meaning an interpreter, even ideal, ascribes to it. For in principle we can always be wrong in our intention ascriptions, authors can deceive when professing to reveal themselves, and so on. None of this is news. But it is important to see that the image of an intention is potent here only because it holds in place so perfectly the image of *that thing* which is external to a literary work but which can seem essential for settling questions about its meaning. And the thing can change. It is not just an intention that matters here, and so it is a mistake to think that that scepticism rides on the coherence of intentionalist theories of interpretation. What matters is all of the historical, cultural, and contextual information that is not part of the express content of work—that is in fact external to it—and that is essential for understanding it. To ask why Shakespeare found the image of the Jew or African (Shylock, Othello, or Aaron the Moor) so dramatically potent, or why Milton's *Paradise Lost* is so vehement in its attacks on philosophical thought, is not only to wonder about the private intentions of their authors but about *whatever* could put us in contact with the facts of the matter that help us understand why these literary works are as they are.

If we were to look outside philosophy and to literary studies, it would not be the image of an intention but of an *archive* that would gain traction here, and it works just as well, perhaps even better, for our purposes. Think of an archive, just for the sake of argument, as something in which we put all of the contextual information—biographical, historical, cultural—that is of potential relevance for settling questions of why and how an author creates the kind of literary work she does. Now think of the idea of the unknown (to us) authorial intention or of the undiscovered archive (or document therein), and an altogether common form of sceptical doubt can be brought to life. For any interpretation we might offer of a literary work, we offer it without any certainty that time will reveal an intention, a document, an historical fact, that shows the point or project of a work to be other than we take it to be. As I will concede in the next section, it is easy to make a rather big deal of all this, but it does suffice to explain precisely what kind of secrets a literary work can keep from even an ideal scholar. And though this sceptical doubt, like many sceptical doubts, has the air of scholasticism, it does have at least one important consequence. If it cannot be dismissed, then philosophical honesty demands that we say that, *as far as we know*, the meanings we take ourselves to discover in a work might actually be our projections. Constructivism and like theories are not so much positions we endorse as we find that we simply cannot shake; that, like it or not, we might always be doing what the constructivist says we do when interpreting a work of it.¹⁰ We simply do not know (hence the scepticism) whether the

⁹ I ignore the difference between actual and hypothetical intentionalism. Since my concern is ultimately with identifying meaning-relevant material external to a literary work, and since both forms of intentionalism do precisely this, the distinction is not interesting in this context. For excellent survey of interpretative intentionalism in analytic philosophy, see Irvin, Sherri. "Authors, Intentions, and Literary Meaning." *Philosophy Compass* 1.2 (2006): 114-28. For a discussion more in line with the concerns of contemporary literary theory, see Benedetti, Carla. *The Empty Cage: Inquiry Into the Mysterious Disappearance of the Author*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

¹⁰ I am assuming that constructivism is a form of anti-realism: it claims that interpreters *impute*, in an important sense, meanings to literary works and thus that those meanings are not independent from the interpretations which articulate them. For an attempt to show that constructivism and intentionalism are compatible, see Alward, Peter. "Butter Knives and Screwdrivers: An Intentionalist Defense of Radical Constructivism." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72.3 (2014): 247-60. For a discussion of the implications of interpretive constructivism for accounts of the ethical value of art, see Thomson-Jones, Katherine. "Art, Ethics, and Critical Pluralism." *Metaphilosophy* 43.3 (2012): 275-93.

practice of literary interpretation should be construed in fundamentally realist or anti-realism terms.

Now one could here try to reject the relevance of authorial intentions or archival information in settling questions of literary meaning. I will simply assert that this is a bad idea and that in any case my project is not one of condemnation but of understanding the conditions under which meaning scepticism in respect to literature is intelligible. But I note that to dismiss the idea that anything external to a literary work could be decisive when trying to understand the point, nature, or project of a literary work has not been popular since the New Criticism was in vogue.

IV. ARTIFACT MEANING & IMAGINATIVE MEANING

Let me make a very general distinction. We have (at least) two broad ways of hearing, and thus attempting to answer, the vague ‘what does this mean’ question we might ask of a literary work. When one asks this question, the smart response is always, ‘what do *you* mean’ by ‘what does this mean?’ and a way, though just one way, of answering this will lead us to the picture just canvassed: to items external to a literary work. It can lead to, that is, a conceptions of an author’s creative intentions or to a consideration of the sorts of thing one might find in a archive. Or, if inflected differently, ‘what does this mean?’ can be heard as calling on us to specify the cultural and literary conditions that can offer a crucial point of entry into a work. Answers to questions of this sort bring into relief the point of a work by placing it among like works and considering the artistic projects they share. The clarity this can offer is of the sort that is gained when we are told, say, that an apparently impenetrable poem is a high modernist exercise in imagism or impersonalism. Such explanations guide criticism to the ‘aboutness’ of a literary work by bringing to view the general artistic movements, political concerns, philosophical ideas—what Arthur Danto calls an atmosphere of theory—that were in force such that *this* piece of writing could come to be the precise kind of literature it is and appear to speak about the precise set of concerns it does.

I will call meaning of this broadly external sort ‘artifact meaning’, though I confess that I am unhappy with the designation. It is external in the altogether obvious sense that to come to possess it requires looking away from a literary work’s linguistic interior and to material quite literally beyond it (think of an archive). To see a poem, novel or play as an artifact is to consider it from the vantage point of a *created object*, the product of purposeful activity that can only be understood in terms of a culture whose practices and institutions make it possible to create such works. Artifact meaning is the form of literary aboutness we search for when we attend to a literary work as a product of human activity that was created for reasons we wish brought to light. Here are some familiar questions that can one can reasonably, if defeasibly, interpret as requests to clarify artifact meaning:

1. What is the point of Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*?
2. Is John Ashbery’s “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” an attempt to explore the chaos of subjective experience in modernity or the chaos of culture in America?
3. What does Jonathan Franzen mean by ‘freedom’ in that terrible book, *Freedom*?

We are at times justified in hearing questions of literary meaning as invitations to

specify artifact meaning, and I take the proceeding arguments to have provided reasons for accepting this. What invites scepticism here is, of course, that artifact meaning is an externalist brand of literary meaning: it is meaning that can be identified only by looking beyond a work and to information concerning the context of its production. What I want to discuss now is what happens if we limit ourselves to a work's interior and to a form of literary meaning which is evidently internal to it. The question then will be whether scepticism makes sense on a broadly internalist model of literary meaning. If not, the anti-sceptic can find no recourse in an 'autonomist' view of literary meaning that limits all meaning-relevant material to what can found entirely inside the literary work of art.

To bring my point to view, let me first say what I am *not* arguing for. I am not arguing for a distinction analogous to the *speaker meaning* versus *expression meaning* distinction. Clearly artifact meaning has much in common with speaker meaning, with the attempt to specify what one is trying to do with the words one utters, which cannot always be read off the semantic surface, the mere dictionary meaning, of those words. But the notion of expression meaning offers the utterly wrong picture for the form of meaning I will introduce. It is not a matter of what words signify, of the 'natural' meaning of a sentence considered in isolation from questions of what its speaker means by it, and so on. This is important to see, lest we think that unthinkably stupid thought that has tempted some: that literary meaning—the meaning of a work—is just the semantic meaning of the lines which constitute a work. Meaning of this sort is surely crucial to any interpretive practice, but it is the first rung of a ladder we must ascend if we wish to arrive at the richness of critical discourse and the forms of internal meaning it can at times concern.

I offer a particular way of making sense of the general sort of meaning I have in mind. What is important for my argument is that meaning of this general sort exists, and one can grant me this even if one is not sold on the precise account of it I will give, which I shall call an account of 'imaginative meaning.' I mean nothing especially technical by 'imagination.' In the broadest sense, the imagination is a power of a transcendence, invoked when a philosopher needs to explain how we make available to the mind that which is in excess of the material that is directly present to it. When I speak of imaginative meaning, I am not claiming that it is meaning we encounter only if we literally envision something in the mind's inner cinema, and in fact I intend nothing especially psychological by the phrase. What I *do* mean to imply by 'imaginative meaning' is that within a literary work we can find forms of meaning that are in excess of anything the language of the work says, and hence when interpretation has these forms of meaning as its object, an act of transcendence is required. Let me explain.

The following presents one way of thinking about what this meaning is and how it is located in a work. When we look with a work we just find, as Hamlet would say, "words, words, words." But when placed in the context of literature, these words become productive in a very unique way. They function not, or not just, to generate 'semantic content' or to express 'concepts'. Words, when placed in the context of a literary work, hold in place the texture of a *world*: they are generative of, standardly, a fictional space we must explore if we are to be put in touch with what a work wishes us to see. A fictional space can be seen as a form of imaginative space, though lyric poetry, often decidedly non-fictional, will in its own way generate an imaginative space. And it is in this space that a kind of meaning is produced, what I wish to call imaginative meaning.¹¹ Virtually every theory of fiction acknowledges the

¹¹ I develop this in Gibson, John. "Interpreting Words, Interpreting Worlds." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.4 (2006): 439-50.

‘world-generating’ capacity of literary language and links it to an essentially imaginative activity. In the case of works of fiction, this imaginative activity is usually explained in terms of make-believe and similar forms of pretense; in the case of poetry, we find all the theories which ask us to see lyrics as engaged in a more or less painterly production of images—this is sometimes called the ‘ekphrastic’ dimension of poetic language—that gives us, in addition to mere language, *objects* of appreciation. The point is, in the context of literature, language does not simply express a proposition or embed a description. It is charged with an essentially creational power, conjuring up a world (think of the realist novel), or an environment of thought and feeling (think of the short lyric): a sense of a *place* we must explore, a *picture* of human circumstance we are asked to see, and so on. These are things we can encounter only if we read the language of a work as specifying a kind of imaginative stance to take toward it.¹² My point is that this imaginative stance opens us up to a distinct realm of meaning in a literary work.

Meaning of this imaginative sort is a matter of *significance* and not *signification*. When a critic says that *The Waste Land* is about the impoverishment of experience in modernity and the collapse of culture and history, she surely is *not* describing anything the ‘language’ that runs through Eliot’s work *means*, for it says no such thing at all. As critical expressions of meaning, they are intelligible only as an attempt to specify the value, the import, of the images which litter the work: of decay, of meaningless cries, of ritualized behavior without an apparent point, of conversations which never appear to culminate in mutual understanding, and so on. The critic is articulating, if you will, the meaningfulness of the work’s vision and not the meaning of its language. Or consider if we say of Book IX of *Paradise Lost* that Eve’s fall implies that we are capable of evil even if we possess no moral knowledge; it suffices merely to ignore commandments that issue from the source of law itself. Milton says nothing to this effect, and the critic is clearly not paraphrasing the meaning of any of the poem’s various lines. The critic is rather identifying the import of the *story* of the fall as told there: one cannot possess moral knowledge prior to eating from the Tree of Knowledge itself, and thus Eve—and presumably we, too—can be held accountable for our actions even if when committing them we possess no knowledge of right and wrong in an properly ethical sense. But to speak in a such a way requires seeing human circumstance *in* Eve’s story: it is how we make this story meaningful to us, and it reveals that the work can speak in excess of what its language actually says.

Literary meaning of this variety is strongly irreducible to the language of a work, though obvious points of connection must exist. At its core, interpretation carried out in this imaginative register is a matter of making sense of the *vision* a work of art embodies. To arrive at the form of meaning this makes available, we clearly must see more than the mere word provides: a picture of life as burdened with certain demands, challenges, and temptations, all of which must be made sense of. What I am calling imaginative meaning is a generic way of gesturing towards the grand forms of non-semantic meanings religious, poetic, and narrative literature has always sought to deliver. Neither of my examples is especially sophisticated, but each suffices to remind ourselves of something we surely already knew: our imaginative involvement with a literary work allows us to find in its interior a much broader range of meaning, significance, and aboutness than its mere language offers.

¹²I develop this in Gibson, John. *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

I will simply declare that when engaged in the imaginative specification of literary meaning, so-conceived, authorial intentions and the like play no privileged role, apart, say, from the role of expert witness. Here is a pithy story that will illustrate this in a very familiar way. Imagine you are sitting around a table with friends one of whom is trying to explain how his grandfather, dead now for years, *looked*. After struggling for a few seconds, he proclaims, “here it is: he looked just like the coast of Scotland.” Imagine too that everyone marvels at the metaphor and begins to imagine a ruggedly beautiful individual whose visage is atmospheric, brooding, dark, strong, ancient, and so on. Your friend, however, appears to have a very different sense of Scotland and is dumfounded. He insists that he meant to say, “my grandfather was *really* unattractive.” Evidently his image of Scotland is very different from yours. Metaphors always offer elegant examples of imaginative meaning. What everyone did in this case was consider the grandfather’s face in light of an image of the coast of Scotland, allowing their imaginative sense of the latter to frame and color an otherwise indeterminate image of this man—the metaphor endows our once null sense of what his grandfather looked like with sudden and remarkable determinacy. The disagreement is one of whether or not the coast of Scotland is an image of beauty, of the aesthetic properties one discerns when one imagines it (or of those properties one takes to be conventionally associated with it: we would all know that “he looked like the coast of New Jersey” would have been an insult, even if we have never been to New Jersey or if in truth its coast is not so bad). There is no contradiction here, just a different sense of how we should place the image of Scotland in the space of beauty: of what we see, in a clearly imaginative sense, when we consider what the metaphor asks us to see.

Notice that we can, if we wish, ask the the question of what the metaphor *means* as a call to specify artifact meaning, that is, in this case, a call to specify what the speaker meant to convey through this metaphor. But also notice that it can be construed in independence of this, since it is perfectly intelligible to respond to your friend by saying, “I see what you wanted to say with that metaphor, but it was inapt, since it conveys something other than you wish it to.” At any rate, I trust it is not unreasonable to think that in principle imaginative meaning can be independent of artifact meaning. I also hope this example gives clarity to the crucial point about imaginative meaning: it is a form of value ascription, essentially concerned with articulating the significance and import of what we see in a story, lyric, or metaphor. I do not wish to deny that there are ways of asking what a literary work means in which artifact and imaginative meaning become too intermeshed to be, in practice, separable; and the distinction I have here developed raises all sorts of interpretive issues I haven’t the time to explore. But it does permit me to stage the crucial question: is scepticism about imaginative meaning intelligible?

What we lose when we pass from questions of artifact meaning to imaginative meaning is the picture of something external to the interpreter and the literary work—an authorial intention, an item in an archive—that could defeat our claims to critical knowledge, to *knowing* what a literary work means. In a sense, the specification of imaginative meaning requires just two things: a text and a culturally literate mind. There is, it may seem, nothing foreign to each potential ignorance of which implies that we cannot *know* whether a given interpretation imputes meaning to a literary work or fully discovers it in. And for this reason, it may seem that there is nothing to motivate a worry about whether the realist or the anti-realist offers the correct account of the metaphysical nature of interpretive activity. Simply put, what sense could scepticism possibly have when considering a form of meaning that

appears to be so manifestly internal to a work?

The answer, one will have guessed, is that a distinct form scepticism now becomes imaginable. Interpretations carried out in this imaginative register effectively collapse the distinction between how we see a work and how we see the world; it makes the activities through which we assign significance, value, and import to a literary works continuous with how we do so in respect to life itself. What allows an excellent critic to articulate such sophisticated patterns of aboutness, import, and significance in respect to a work is not only her mastery of literary culture but of culture itself. Yet culture is surely something we can, and in ways unbeknownst to ourselves, succeed or fail to possess, if always as a matter of degree. I suspect that any interpreter possessed of modesty and self-knowledge will know the feeling. It is the worry, the sense that is at times so hard to shake, that our understanding of cultural life may ultimately fail to be sophisticated enough to enable us to capture fully the significance of culturally complicated objects. It is to wonder whether there is a vantage-point from which our attempts to articulate the meaning of a work are vulgar, dull, unimaginative, superficial. When this form of doubt surfaces, it is explicitly experienced *as a failure of epistemic intimacy*; our self-doubt creates the sense of a gap that earlier the picture of a hidden item in an archive did. My sense of interpretive insecurity is reflective of a general worldly and cultural anxiety, of my faith that I can make proper sense of life, in literature or in the great world itself.

The form of sceptical doubt that is intelligible here is in effect a self-doubt. The possibility it raises is not quite that of a literary work whose meaning is wholly different from we take it to be it is. It is that we must be different from what we in fact are if we are to be able to grasp the meaning of a literary work. If I want to understand a literary work, I have to make myself an ideal reader, I must improve my capacity to make meaningful, to articulate the significance of, life, both in literature and out. Scepticism here would grow in that dark space in which it becomes imaginable—and it surely is—that there is still something we do not know, a sensitivity we must cultivate, a concern we must come to feel, a dimension of experience we must learn to see, etc., if our interpretations are ever to be adequate to what they aspire to explain. The flawed interpretations we can offer up in this case are defective not quite because they are *false* but because they are *impoverished*. Like one who says ‘shit happens’ in the face of a remarkable event, we simply fail to capture the complexity of the material before us. Metaphysical issues in the theory of interpretation are not very interesting here. The sceptical wonder here is not whether our interpretations ascribe meanings to works that are wholly other than the meanings they truly bear, and so the concerns which sustain constructivism and like forms of interpretive anti-realism are perhaps idle when concerning this kind of self-doubt. The question now is not quite whether an interpreter sees a work for what it is so much as whether she sees enough of what it is.

It is tempting to say that our Ideal Milton Scholar could not possibly be possessed of such self-doubt and such poverty of explanatory resources, since she by definition has mastered all the culture required for making sense of *Paradise Lost*. This is perhaps so, but of course no actual interpreter can know herself to be an ideal interpreter. We all have cultural deficits, secret shames in respect to our sensibilities, forms of moral blindness and aesthetic unsophistication in respect to this or that region of the human world. We call them blindspots, and I take it to be too obvious to warrant an argument that we can be spectacularly bad at identifying them in ourselves. This is one way of understanding why Hume’s Ideal Critic is just that, an ideal, and not a post in which any actual critic may find employment. So we can recast the sceptical doubt accordingly: *as far as we know, interpretations never succeed in yielding the meaning of a literary work, since it is always conceivable that the interpreters*

who produce them are less than ideal.

At the beginning of this essay I said that I wish to explore an odd sceptical question, and I trust this discussion of interpretive self-doubt has delivered on the promised oddness. But that is not to say that it fails to register an insight. It is odd, but it strikes me as ultimately presenting a doubt we actually suffer, surely at moments, when we confront great expanses of the culture we find in literary works. Just consider the first time you read Rilke, Plath, or Pound.

V. CONCLUSION

I end with a provocation. If scepticism feels a bit *passé*, at least if viewed against the concerns of contemporary analytic philosophy, *fictionalism* is quite in vogue, so much so that we now have epistemic fictionalists, moral fictionalists, even fictionalists in the philosophy of mathematics.¹³ A fictionalist argues that the stance we must take towards the basic claims—typically ontological—that animate a field of discourse is one of *make-believe* rather than belief. A fictionalist stance is required when we have come to see that a region of discourse is indispensable to our cultural practices but that we have lost grounds for believing in the commitments evidently demanded by that discourse. Crudely put, fictionalism is attractive when we can neither abandon a way of talking nor tolerate the implication that by engaging in it we actually believe what we are saying. We may find that the abstract objects of mathematics do not exist, but we will not stop using propositions which imply otherwise ('3 is prime').

Now it is always hard to explain just why one should care about odd sceptical doubts. What, exactly, do they show us? In conclusion, I suggest that they should be seen as showing us the following. Let *critical fictionalism* be the claim that the appropriate attitude towards the language of literary interpretation ought to be make-believe, and think of meaning scepticism of the sort canvassed here as implying that, as far as we know (hence the scepticism), critical fictionalism identifies the correct attitude we should take towards the claims of criticism. Claims of the basic 'x means y' sort, when said in respect to literature, are not to be construed literally at all. They are ultimately figurative, though we behave as though they were straightforward descriptions of properties of works themselves. Critical fictionalism, then, is a galling way of putting the upshot of an idea that has been around for many years now: that the language of criticism is irreducibly metaphoric. Critical fictionalism is perhaps a horrible idea, but, as with all sceptical doubts and the positions they generate, the trick is to find philosophical grounds on which simply to dismiss it.¹⁴

¹³ For a survey of fictionalism in philosophy, see Sainsbury, R. M. *Fiction and Fictionalism*. London: Routledge, 2010.

¹⁴ Earlier versions of this paper were read at Temple University and Bryn Mawr College. I am especially grateful to Michael Krausz and Joe Margolis for their comments and criticism. One cannot imagine a better audience for work on this topic. I am also grateful to Dirk-Martin Grube for his patience and excellent suggestions.