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Interpreting Words, Interpreting Worlds

Words, Words, Words.

—*Hamlet*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a curious feature of recent philosophy of literature that the so-called learning from literature debate has been carried out almost exclusively in terms of the problem of fiction, that is, as the problem of how works of literary fiction, bringing as they do *imagined* worlds to view, could possibly be an important source of knowledge about *our* world. It is curious not because this seems like the wrong place to discuss the problem of how we might learn from literature—of course it is not. It is rather that virtually nothing has been said about this matter in an area of aesthetics one would think just as natural a place to address it: the theory of interpretation. After all, the theory of interpretation is concerned with issues of textual meaning and about-ness, and the question of whether we can learn from literature would seem at least partially to be a question of whether literary works can "mean" something of cognitive consequence or be "about" reality in any epistemologically interesting sense. Discussions of the cognitive value of literature and the nature of interpretation are two of the liveliest in current aesthetics, and it is striking, indeed odd, that there has been no explicit attempt to build a bridge between the two.[1] It is the prospect of fruitfully uniting these two discussions that I shall explore in this article. I hope to show that if we approach the problem of learning from literature by way of a theory of interpretation, we can find a novel respect in which the literary work of art can be a source not only of aesthetic value but also of significant cognitive value.

II. THE PROBLEM OF LITERARY COGNITIVISM

Before beginning, I should give a sense of what I take the problem to be. The idea of learning from literature—we might call this *the thesis of literary cognitivism*—evidently asks us to show that literary works can be treated as attempting to *tell* us something about the way our world is; that is, to show that part of the project of many, though certainly not all, literary works is to articulate an insight into some fairly specific aspect of human experience and circumstance. If literary works did not do at least this, it would be very difficult to state precisely *what* a certain literary work stands to show us about reality, and thus we would find ourselves hard-pressed to explain just what it is we think we can learn from them.

Yet such a claim, even so mildly put, appears to sit uncomfortably with a collection of reflections that cast doubt on the idea of literature as genuinely capable of showing or telling us something about the world. To rehearse a now familiar argument, in works of literary fiction we find none of the rational constraints that are commonly taken to be essential to explaining how a form of discourse can make knowledge-claims: claims that are genuine candidates for epistemological scrutiny.[2] Unlike scientific or philosophical writing, in most works of imaginative literature we find no structure of argumentation, no marshalling of evidence, no attempts at justification, no giving of reasons—*nothing* to give epistemological support to whatever it is we think the literary work is trying to reveal about our world. But without any of this, we appear to lose the idea that literature is (or can be) attempting to (or be able to) show us something about the world—at least in such a way that this act of showing might result

in a state of knowing. Put differently, for those features of a work of fiction that appear to be attempting to cast light on reality, we will ultimately find them to be in all epistemologically relevant respects ungrounded and unsupported and so hardly a source of anything that merits the title of knowledge. Add to this that the content of works of imaginative literature is characteristically *fictive*, speaking about invented worlds rather than the real one, and it becomes exponentially more difficult to comprehend what it might even mean to treat literature as having genuine cognitive aspirations. Or so the reasoning goes.

Few philosophers take this to be something worth lamenting, as though it reveals one of literature's secret shames. It is not that literature sees its labor as one of attempting to offer knowledge of the world yet is somehow constitutionally incapable of fulfilling its task; the upshot is often thought to be that we would do well to regard literature as engaged in other, more properly aesthetic pursuits, at any rate something other than the pursuit of knowledge and like sorts of cognitive illumination.[3] That is, these reflections are taken to bring home the fact that literature itself does not invite us to take what we might call a "cognitive stance" toward its content: literature simply does not desire to be read for worldly knowledge—for it has none to offer—and it does nothing to encourage such an activity.

Although one may (and most certainly would) take issue with one or another of the claims made in the above reflections, I shall grant here, if just for the sake of argument, the basic point they jointly urge: we find nothing *in* literary works that is in any relevant sense a source of extra-literary knowledge. This is in effect what these reflections and arguments challenge, the idea that we might be able to locate some property *internal* to literary works that is itself generative of literature's supposed cognitive value, as might be the case with philosophical and scientific texts, by virtue of their explicit argumentative or evidentiary structure. We can accept that there is no such internal property, as I shall argue, because we turn out not to need one to make sense of the thesis of literary cognitivism. Thus, contrary to a long-standing way of approaching the problem—call it the "internalist" approach—I wish to show that we do not need to see works of literary fiction as containing *within* them some device or structure (a mode of claiming, showing, arguing, and so forth) that is productive of their cognitive value. Rather, I shall urge an "externalist" approach and argue that we can locate the relevant structure we do not find in literary works *in our interpretive encounters with these works*.

III. CRITICAL AND LINGUISTIC MEANING

At first glance, an externalist approach will hardly seem promising for the development of an account of literature's cognitive value. If we give up the attempt to ground literary cognitivism on a picture of literary works themselves as trying, simply put, *to tell* us something about the world, how will a theory of interpretation help us here? For on a very common conception, interpretation concerns precisely this: the activity of bringing to light what a literary work is trying to say. Indeed, according to an entrenched view, literature is primarily a medium through which a writer conveys a meaning, makes a claim, urges a point, says something. Is not the issue for the interpreter simply to grasp the meaning a literary work is attempting to convey? And if we part with this idea, as the approach I will urge claims that in a crucial respect we should, to what extent are we still talking about interpretation?

In one sense, it is obvious that interpretation does concern what a literary work "says" or attempts to "convey" in a straightforward linguistic sense. For example, we often must engage in disambiguation in the presence of semantic infelicities such as vague descriptions, unintelligible sentences, misused or misprinted words, and the like. Consider the oft-cited example of "tender" accidentally becoming "tinder" upon the printing of Hart Crane's poem "Thy Nazarene and Tinder Eyes," or that as one moves between the various folios and quartos, Hamlet's "oh that this too too sullied flesh would melt" becomes "solid flesh" and "sallied flesh." Surely much of what we must do when reading works such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is attempt to give sense to the almost endless semantic convulsions of their language. Interpretation in these cases is a matter of settling the sense of the language of a text, of assigning a determine meaning to some ambiguous or linguistically curious feature of it. This is an activity virtually all literary works call upon at one point or another, and I nowhere here want to deny this. Since this concerns the attempt to render clear

the language of a literary work, I shall call this sort of meaning "linguistic meaning" and the interpretive activity it is tied to "linguistic interpretation."

Yet a problem arises when we realize that we are talking about something more interesting, and much more philosophically challenging, when we speak of meaning in literary-critical contexts. When we ask about the "meaning" of a literary work we do not usually have in mind *word* or *sentence* meaning. We ask what the *text* means, what sense we can attribute to the literary object itself rather than to its constitutive sentences. In this case we are speaking of a variety of meaning that stands over and above the express meaning of the language of the text. Think of the habit of treating William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as partly "about" the survival, or destruction (depending on one's reading), of reason and culture when confronted with savagery, though what Shakespeare in fact wrote speaks instead of a certain Prospero, a stranded Milanese scholar and aristocrat, and Caliban, a monster he enslaves. Consider when we say of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* that Bartleby's refusals "mean" something about estrangement as a condition of modern life, while all Bartleby ever actually says is "I would prefer not." Think of when we claim that Samuel Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* offers an insight into the nature of poetic inspiration, despite the fact that when we examine the language of this poem we just find talk of pleasure domes and seething chasms. For reasons that will become clearer below, I shall call this sort of meaning "critical" and the activity it concerns "critical interpretation." This is the sort of meaning and interpretive activity I am concerned with here (and that I shall ultimately use to develop a theory of literary cognitivism).[4]

Now since literary works are, as the saying goes, "pieces of language," an interpreter is clearly talking about a linguistic object when articulating critical meanings of this variety. However, they are an odd sort of meaning, for they are not descriptive of any feature of the language of these works, certainly not of anything these works in any literal sense say. There is a clear dependence of critical meaning on the language of a literary work, for the interpreter offers a critical interpretation as a way of understanding a literary work, and he or she would not, presumably, understand a work *this* way if its language were other than it is. However, the concept of interpretation is intimately linked to the concept of understanding—of making sense of something—and the problem here is that it is not quite the language of the text that the interpreter is trying to understand better. We can imagine, for example, a literary work so simply and clearly written (and likely dull for these reasons) that (1) it requires no linguistic interpretation and (2) an interpreter finds it rich in critical meaning. So critical interpretation seems not to be a species of linguistic interpretation, for it is an activity that can be engaged when the latter is not. Thus what we want to know is: What exactly is this sort of meaning, what generates it, of what is it descriptive, if not the linguistic meaning of the literary work?

There may be a temptation here to go deeper into the philosophy of language in search of more refined senses of conveyed meaning with which to explain critical meaning. For example, one might be inclined to look toward a notion of implied or indirect meaning: meaning that is conveyed through, but that cannot be identified with, the express or "surface" meaning of a piece of language. There are two frameworks in which I can imagine one trying to develop this line of thought, applying, with some adjustments, either (1) a version of intentionalism, namely, the idea that literary meaning is to be identified with a conception of a real or postulated (hypothetical) author's intended meaning; or (2) a version of conventionalism, namely, the idea that literary meaning is determined by public linguistic conventions (as opposed to authorial intentions), broadly construed.[5] Conventionalism and intentionalism are standard positions in contemporary theories of interpretation—indeed, they often are treated as marking the two poles of possible positions one may assume in the debate—and each has its own way of being helpful. My doubt here only concerns their suitability for illuminating critical meaning. Let me offer a few words as to why.

A conventionalist in the theory of interpretation might argue something like the following. We know, for example, that the sentence "you needn't come in tomorrow" implies or, in Gricean terms, implicates the proposition "you are fired" when uttered in certain contexts, even though this meaning cannot be tethered to the semantic value of the sentence in fact uttered. What typically happens in cases like this is that we have knowledge of relevant linguistic conventions (that have reference to the conditions under which an utterance

is made), which in turn build a bridge between the express and implied meanings of the sentence uttered. Thus the philosopher who embraces a conventionalist theory of interpretation might claim that critical meaning functions in much the same way. Meaning of the critical variety is not part of the surface meaning of the language of the text. Rather, there are appropriate linguistic conventions in place such that the language of the literary work can indirectly convey them. In short, critical meanings are implied propositions.

Here is the problem. There is not, nor would one expect there to be, *any* linguistic convention that unites the language of *The Tempest* with a claim about the survival of culture, nor one that weds the descriptions of Xanadu found in *Kubla Khan* with a proposition about the nature of poetic creation. It is entirely plausible to think that specific sentence or utterance types can bear a conventional link to specific implied propositions, but it is quite impossible to see how an entire work of imaginative fiction, composed of thousands of sentences, could ever come to bear such a link. It would be an extraordinary accomplishment if a culture could develop such complex conventions, and one can only wonder how it would go about instructing readers in their application. Critical meanings are too *sui generis*, too occasional, to think they can be explained with reference to general linguistic conventions.

Of course, once a critical tradition arises around a certain literary work, that work can come to bear a conventional link to a certain critical meaning, say as marking a culturally entrenched way of interpreting it (for instance, the habit, common since the mid-twentieth century, though not before it, of reading *Othello* as in part a meditation on race). But the question we are pursuing is, what gets this process afoot in the first instance? What are critics identifying when they claim to have discovered a certain critical meaning in a literary work? It cannot be convention all the way down, for it is very unlikely that there are linguistic conventions at critics' disposal to guide them at this initial stage of critical discovery. And this is the stage we want to understand: What are critics describing when they claim to have uncovered a certain critical meaning, if not something the text actually says?

Intentionalism is a bit trickier. I would think that some version of intentionalism is true of what I am calling linguistic interpretation. To give but one example, a conception of Shakespeare's intentions (or the intentions a competent audience would attribute to him, and so forth) might be required to settle whether Hamlet's flesh should be read as "sullied" or "sallied."[6] I would also think that considerations of an actual or postulated author's intentions may at times offer a constraint on the range of critical meanings we can attribute to a work, and this in turn can help us understand what to do when we find ourselves confronted with conflicting critical interpretations (simply put, we disqualify those that cannot reasonably be attributed to a conception of what an author may have meant by his or her work). But note that this tells us nothing about how critical meanings themselves are generated—about what prods the interpreter to offer them up—and this is our question. Rather, it helps us understand what we should do with critical meanings once generated and found to be in conflict. Thus it sheds no light on what occasions the activity of critical interpretation itself, on just what the interpreter has identified when he or she attributes a critical meaning to a text.

Should intentionalists wish to make a stronger claim and argue that it is a consideration of authorial intentions that occasions critical interpretation (rather than merely acting as a constraint on those we already find ourselves inclined to attribute to an artwork), they court nonsense and literary barbarism. For it is the text that occasions critical interpretation, and to fall afoul of this fact is, as Monroe Beardsley would have it, to forget that the object of interpretive scrutiny is an artwork and not something beyond it.[7] Accordingly, it will be of no use to argue that critical meaning, though not manifest in the language of the text, forges its initial link to the text by way of a conception of an authorial intention that the text be read a certain way—a species of indirect meaning in this sense—for we have no way of explaining how this conception might be made present to interpreters such that it could call their critical activity in to service. Presumably, interpreters do not offer the critical meaning in the example of *The Tempest* because they have some *independent* notion that Shakespeare might have meant this with his work, quite apart from anything they actually encounter in Shakespeare's creation. It *must* be something in the work; otherwise, it would not occur to the interpreters to state it.[8] Now it may be, as so-called neo-Wittgensteinians like to point out, that authorial intentions are embedded in the

language of the text, and thus that to describe the text will at times be by default to describe these intentions.[9] But as we have seen, it does not seem to be the language of the text we are describing when engaged in critical interpretation, and so considerations of its language will hardly seem apt for helping us understand what prompts critical interpretation. Thus the question still stands: What occasions critical meaning, what does it describe, what is its object?

IV. WORDS AND WORLDS

There still may be an urge to continue mining the philosophy of language in search of ever more refined senses of linguistic meaning, more complex intentionalist or conventionalist models of indirect communication. One might expect such moves, given the extent to which so much of aesthetics tends to concentrate on the linguistic dimension of interpretation. What I want to suggest, however, is that we do not need more linguistic categories and distinctions to understand this. We need more properly aesthetic ones. That is, we need an account of how literary works engage the imagination and, in so doing, help bring about a unique object of appreciation, an object to which we simply have no access if we take a purely linguistic stance toward a literary work.

What I have in mind is the following. It is true that when we look within a literary work we find only, as Bernard Harrison puts it, "a tissue of words," but this tissue of words does something extraordinary when placed in the context of a literary work: it holds in place the texture of a *world*.[10] It is not an actual world, needless to say. It is what we commonly refer to as a "fictional world."[11] That literary works project fictional worlds is hardly news. It has been a fixture of discussions about art in analytic aesthetics at least since Nelson Goodman's *Ways of World Making*.[12] What is rather astonishing is that this feature of the literary work of art is virtually never mentioned in current work on interpretation.[13] This, as one might put it, *world-generating* capacity of literary language is not shared in common with language in standard linguistic contexts. A hallmark of ordinary speech is the use of language to describe the world; a hallmark of literature is the use of language to create one. One would expect this difference between language in literary and standard communicative contexts to have important consequences for a theory of literary interpretation.

There are many well-known ways of accounting for this world-generating capacity of literary language, almost all of which link it to a certain imaginative activity. Consider, for example, popular varieties of make-believe, simulation, and possible-world theories of fiction, to name but a few. These theories tend to begin their account of our engagement with literature by emphasizing not primarily or especially the *meaning* the language of a text tries to convey, but the *imaginings* it prescribes. Though the two are inseparable—an imagining is prescribed by the language of a text, that is, by its meaning in a straightforward linguistic sense—this switch in emphasis is important, for it reveals the uniqueness of our way of encountering language in literary contexts. Literature disengages language from its standard function of referring to and representing the real world and instead places it in a certain imaginative space. This act is transformative: without it the language of a literary work is idle, nonreferential, a representation of literally nothing at all. Representations require objects, for without them there is nothing to be represented. Literary works generate these objects and the fictional worlds they inhabit in tandem with the reader, by presenting their language as in effect a recipe for the imagination. It is through this that a text that would otherwise remain a continuous string of empty representations is given substance: that it is united with something for it to be about, to speak of, to describe.

This imaginative act that opens up to view the fictional world of a work makes possible a form of literary experience and appreciation to which we have no access if we take a purely linguistic stance toward a literary work. We might recall Bertrand Russell's infamous claim that statements descriptive of Hamlet are "all false because there was no such man," which is an excellent example of the poverty of talk about literature when carried from a purely semantic perspective.[14] Literature's invocation of the imagination puts us into contact with something over and above, as it were, *Sinn*. It gives us a world, and to this extent a unique object of appreciative and interpretive scrutiny. If this is so, it suggests that this imaginative activity brings with it a distinct region of appreciation and interpretive investigation, in the form of the world a literary work brings to view. This is a region that is made available to appreciation only when we

add to whatever linguistic stance we take toward a literary work this imaginative one.

We can now begin to say something positive about the nature of critical interpretation. It concerns, especially, the investigation of a world. The first thing to see is that worlds and what we find in them—characters, relationships, actions, events, among other things—have a sort of meaning and about-ness, but of a markedly different sort from words and sentences. The institutional oppression of a minority is *about* racism; the fact of love might *mean* that at the end of the day we are nevertheless capable of decent relationships. Or who knows? The point is that to explain meaning and about-ness in these cases, we do not try to identify a linguistic entity such as a proposition or statement that is given expression in these features of our world. Worlds, unlike words, do not bear meaning in this way, nor need they in order to be meaningful. This is because when applied to the structure of a world, of a practice, of human circumstance, meaning and about-ness are in common usage tied to a notion not of signification but significance, not meaning in a linguistic sense but import in an explanatory sense.

This is what critical meaning is. Rather than directed at the recovery of linguistic meaning, critical interpretation marks a process of articulating patterns of salience, value, and significance in the worlds literary works bring to view. That is, critical interpretation marks the moment of our engagement with the world of the work, and it has as its goal the attempt to bring to light what we find of consequence in this world. If this is so, we can admit, for example, that *Bartleby the Scrivener* literally says nothing about modern alienation, and yet, for all that, it is not quite silent on the matter. It speaks about it not because it offers a word to this effect, but because it offers a world to this effect. It is part of the critic's task to devise an interpretive framework that can render explicit the meaning, the significance, of human life as configured in the world Melville created for us.

Let me offer two examples of critical interpretation to help give shape to my point. Consider Terry Eagleton, who finds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* a vision of a common human struggle.

> The point for Lily is to distance herself from the image of Mrs Ramsey to the point where she can freely acknowledge its influence. Her art allows her to do both, drawing the image of Mrs Ramsey closer yet "placing" her, and so in a way triumphing over her. This illustrates a more general truth. Only by acknowledging the sources of our being, acknowledging our unsavoury historical heritage, can we have the power to free ourselves from them. If we are to sever ourselves from the maternal body and move beyond it, it can only be by recognizing our own continuing dependence on it.[15]

Cleanth Brooks, in his classic interpretation of Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*, begins by claiming that the work offers a "progression from murkiness to increasing enlightenment" as it "dramatizes for us with compelling urgency a situation we have come to accept almost as our own."[16] This urgency, he argues, resides in its presentation of a certain picture of modern circumstance.

> The decay of the Compsons can be viewed, however, not merely with reference to the Southern past but to the contemporary scene. It is tempting to read it as a parable of the disintegration of modern man. Individuals no longer sustained by familial and cultural unity are alienated and lost in private worlds. One thinks here not merely of Caddy, homeless, the sexual adventuress adrift in the world, or of Quentin, out of touch with reality and moving inevitably to his death, but also and even primarily of Jason, for whom the break-up means the active rejection of claims and responsibilities, and with it, a sense of liberation.

The critical activity in Eagleton's case is a matter of placing Lily's relation to her painting and its subject in a broader context of human activity, namely, the struggle to overcome what we find ugly and shameful in ourselves without denying who we in fact are. According to Eagleton, the text is in part *about* this struggle. In Brooks's example, the Compson family holds in place a picture of the world in which the pursuit of the personal leads necessarily to estrangement from others, even as, one might add, a retreat to the public (family, community) is rather bleakly revealed to be just a more complex form of isolation. This is part of what Brooks takes the text *to mean*. That is, each work is read as registering—though differently and perhaps incompatibly—certain visions of our relation to ourselves and to others, and thus of something about our way in the world.

Note that we will find none of this given mention in *To the Lighthouse* or *The Sound and the Fury*. Indeed, if literary interpretation is thought to be tied only to an attempt to render clear the meaning

of text, and if this, in turn, is conceived as a largely linguistic enterprise, critical interpretations of this sort are bound to seem gratuitous, perhaps senseless, for these texts literally say nothing of the sort. Vindicating this sort of critical discourse requires situating it not in the search to render clear the linguistic act of literary work but in the struggle to articulate the significance of its imaginative act. What critical passages such as Eagleton's and Brooks's bring to light is that the object of appreciation and interpretive scrutiny extends beyond the language that runs through the literary work of art. That is, they show us that through our imaginative involvement with these works, we give ourselves access to a broader range of meaning and thus a richer appreciation of Woolf's and Faulkner's creations. What the critic's voice provides here is witness to this further region of literary meaning, to the capacity of literature to be about much more than what we find stated on the printed page.

Meaning of this sort is critical not only in the sense that it marks a prominent way literary critics speak in their interpretive activities; it is critical in the more interesting sense that it requires the voice of the interpreter—the critic's voice—to be made manifest. Critical interpretation is a matter of putting to words what we find of significance in the world of a work, of rendering discursively the import of what we witness imaginatively. However, this is still compatible with the notion of literary *communication*, that the reader is capturing (rather than simply fabricating) meaning when engaged in critical interpretation. Acknowledging this requires seeing that literary works offer meaning in a unique way by using as the vehicle of communication a world rather than a string of words. Again, there is a clear dependence of the former on the latter, but the meanings we locate in the imaginative space created by a text cannot be reduced to meanings found in its linguistic space, and thus there is dependence without identity between these two sorts of meaning.

What would be dangerous to the idea of interpretation as a rational enterprise—that is, as an activity that is cognitively responsive to its object—would be a picture of critical interpretation that suggests that the critic *constructs* the world of a work in the very act of interpreting it. This is a consequence that often follows from theories of interpretation that give pride of place to the role of the reader in the generation of literary meaning (as we find in many deconstructive or neopragmatist accounts of interpretation). I hope that what I have said here makes it clear that I endorse no such thing. Critical interpretation has a standard external to itself, in the form of the world of the text. When engaged in critical interpretation we *make sense* of this world; we do not construct it. Again, the world of a work is generated by the language of the text, and so rendering explicit the constitution of a fictional world is largely a matter of linguistic interpretation.[17] Thus we have a point of contact with the literary work, and an attendant form of interpretation, that is external to, independent of, the activity of critical interpretation. This offers us a standard against which to check critical interpretations themselves, to determine whether what the critic says is genuinely responsive to and so illuminative of his or her object of scrutiny. The activity of articulating critical meaning is not—to borrow a phrase from John McDowell—a sort of "frictionless spinning in a void" in which nothing constrains what the reader can say about the text except the power of his or her imagination.[18] We have other forms of interpretive access to literary works that, in turn, function to place rational limits on critical discourse.

Before concluding this section it is worth remarking that the picture of critical interpretation I have outlined suggests that our appreciation of literary works is much more firmly in line with our appreciation of the other arts than is often noticed—something we will fail to see if we approach literary interpretation from a purely linguistic standpoint. In most of the arts, we often must use our imagination to see what an artwork wants us to see. Our ability to see a well-known actor as a certain character in a film requires an act of imaginative transformation; otherwise, when viewing *A Street Car Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) we would witness only Marlon Brando and never Stanley Kowalski. Or think of our ability to see a particular motion of the human body in a ballet as the movement of a swan; a stage-set in the theatre as a café in the East Village; an odd configuration of cubes in a painting as a mother embracing her child. None of these viewings would be possible without the aid of the imagination. They are all distilled through an act of the imagination in a way our everyday viewings of nonartistic reality very likely are not. In most of the arts we must in some way imaginatively transform the material we are presented with if we are to encounter the

world of the work. In literature, it is the language that runs through the text that the imagination is to transform; in the visual arts, it is commonly a perceived object. This is enough to keep the boundary between literature and the visual arts intact, but the difference between the sort of imaginative envisioning required by literature and the other arts is a matter of degree, not kind. Critical interpretation, and the form of artistic appreciation to which it is linked, would thus seem to be fairly uniform across the arts, a form of interpretation they have in common.

V. INTERPRETATION AND THE INVESTING OF FICTION WITH LIFE

To use the terminology introduced in the first section, it is common to take an internalist approach to the question of how literature relates to life, attempting to answer it by trying to locate literature's cognitive value solely *within* the literary work of art. Among other things, an approach of this sort often results in a very awkward attempt to claim that literary works, though evidently content to speak about fictions, must also, in some round-about way, be talking about reality. The idea of critical interpretation shows us how we might avoid such an approach, for it brings to light a way of understanding the role that the critic—the interpreter—plays in effecting the passage from literature to life. The theory of critical interpretation outlined here allows us to accept, should we be so inclined, even a strong thesis of fictionality of literary works, namely, that they *say* nothing about reality. It also shows us that a literary work can be about much more than what it explicitly says, and so that even if we embrace a strong thesis of the fictionality of literature, there still remain possibilities for claiming that literature can offer an engagement with extra-textual reality.

Without the critic, and without the reader more generally, there may be little sense to the idea that literature represents reality, for without the critic's voice we find a work that seems to speak about fictions alone, thus representing, if anything, the imaginary rather than the real. But once we look toward the practice of criticism, we find that there is a harmless way of speaking of literature as representational, as offering visions of life. Literature's ability to represent reality need not consist in some mimetic act performed solely by the text; rather, it can be understood to have reference to the ways in which readers imbue literary works with worldly significance. That is, the forging of a literary representation of reality is tied to this activity of placing fictions in a critical context that specifies how they are about or mean something of "real" consequence (and for the remainder of this article, when I speak of representation I use it in the sense I give it here).

Without this act of critical articulation, the passage from literature to life remains a mere potential in the literary work. In critical interpretation we enlarge, we enrich, the scope of literary experience, indeed of the literary work itself. We do so by casting fictional characters and the worlds they inhabit, not as real, but as continuous with—of a piece with—human reality. This is what we see in the examples of Eagleton on Woolf, Brooks on Faulkner, in the claims that Bartleby shows us something about modern alienation, Prospero about culture and reason, and Xanadu the nature of inspiration. That is, we see in these examples that the activity of articulating critical meaning reveals a process of investing fiction with life. There is nothing philosophically suspicious in saying that literature speaks about fictions yet can represent reality, at least if we explain this not in terms of literature's magical ability to speak about two things at once—it does not have this—but rather by remarking on how the conversation that exists between literary works and our interpretive practices can itself be the source of the connection between fiction and reality.

The passage from literature to life does not occur solely within the text (or at least we need not insist that it does if we are to give sense to the idea that literature can be revelatory of reality). It is in part a product of a stance we take toward a text, a critical stance that complements rather than conflicts with whatever "fictive stance" we also assume toward literary content.[19] Indeed, we can find examples of literary works calling on us to assume a stance of this sort. There was an interesting tradition in the history of the novel, one that seems to have vanished when modernism stepped onto the scene. It was the practice of prefacing a novel with a request, simply put, to take the fiction *seriously*. To give two well-known examples, in an author's note Fyodor Dostoevsky says the following about his "Notes from the Underground":

> Both the author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, such persons as

> the author of these memoirs not only may, but must, exist in our society, if we take into consideration the circumstances which led to the formation of our society. It has been my wish to show the public a character of the recent past more clearly than is usually shown.[20]

And as Charles Dickens writes in his preface to *Oliver Twist*:

> It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE . . . It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth. It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature; much of its ugliest hues, and some of its most beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth.[21]

We can find similar requests by Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson— virtually all the first great English novelists.[22] All of them suffered from a certain anxiety, namely, a fear that the fictionality of their texts would lead them to be read as frivolous entertainment. Thus they found it necessary to ask their public to see in their works something the crude reader might miss: this engagement with reality that is not given explicit statement in the language of their literary creations.

Though the tradition of calling for seriousness of appreciation is now extinct, unless we are beholden to a very silly theory, we will not think that this is because we have come to learn that literature is after all just play. The reason the tradition died is likely that we, as a culture, have learned to take the novel seriously, that whereas there was once a question about whether fictions could offer only diversion, we have learned to read aright. What these authors are denying is the appropriateness of a *merely* fictive stance, a stance that cuts our experience of literary content off from anything other than an appreciation of creatures of pure fantasy. Notice how clear these authors are in what they want us to take seriously, how precise their plea is: that we allow their works to show us something about ourselves, our cultural reality; indeed, "more clearly than is usually shown."

If we take an absurdly narrow view of literature—a purely internalist stance that casts literary works as having commerce exclusively with the fantastic and the unreal simply because they tend to speak about fictions—we will not be able to take these authors at their word. But if we are willing to treat them, and our literary culture more generally, as voicing an implicit invitation to read our world into works of fiction, we will have no difficulty doing this. It is common, these days at least, to claim that works of literary fiction carry with them an implicit request to treat their language as prescribing imaginings.[23] What these examples bring to light is that we have reason to see our literary practices as issuing a complementary request: we are called on to assume a critical stance that allows life to be blown into these works, a stance that in turn permits these literary works to reach a further, and intended, destination: a point of contact with our world.

The connection between fiction and reality is external insofar as it requires the presence of something external to the literary work to be made manifest, namely, our critical activities. But this is not to say that it remains severed from literary content, that it marks a way of speaking about something other than what we witness when we look between the covers of a novel. It is better understood as a way of filling out literary content, of imbuing it with this general worldly relevance and thus completing the representation of reality a work wishes to put on offer. Again, critical interpretation marks a way of articulating what the world of a work *means*. In this respect, the critical meanings we attribute to literary works become bound up with our understanding of the content of these works, of what they are about. Thus the connection between fiction and reality achieved in our critical activities never remains wholly external to the work.

VI. CRITICAL INTERPRETATION AND LITERARY COGNITIVISM

I think that one virtue of the preceding arguments is that they open up a number of possibilities for giving sense to the thesis of literary cognitivism. This critical process of investing fiction with life is an activity sufficiently broad to make the idea that there is just *one* sort of cognitive value we can attribute to literature appear rather naive. Since we can now see that the range of literary about-ness extends beyond the fictive and into the real, I would imagine that the clever aesthetician could siphon any number of ways of accounting for literature's cognitive value from the theory of

interpretation developed here. That is, instead of leading us to a specific response to the thesis of literary cognitivism, the theory of critical interpretation I have here sketched offers a foundation for approaching the issue itself, one on which we can build an array of responses to the ways in which literature can be in the business of offering worldly illumination.

With this in mind, in the remaining few paragraphs I outline one way of using this theory of critical interpretation to respond to the thesis of literary cognitivism. It will, I warn, make no reference to the acquisition of so-called propositional knowledge, which is the sort of cognitive value often thought to be at stake here. Rather, what I want to suggest is that critical interpretation plays a role in what we might call *the articulation of culture*, which I take to be quite different from proffering standard sorts of knowledge. By calling on us to ascribe meaning to the range of human activities and experiences a novel brings to critical attention, literature plays an important role in the expansion and refinement of our understanding of social and cultural reality. We may not get truths, properly so called, from this, but we get something just as important from the worldly point of view: the bestowal of sense, of meaning, upon those regions of human circumstance that literature invites us to explore. Let me explain.

Recall that one power we habitually ascribe to literary works in nonphilosophical contexts—a power the argument of the last section permits us to invoke—is its capacity to bring life to view in all its varied complexity. That is, we find a complexity of *vision*, a finely textured presentation of human activity and circumstance. In this respect, the process of giving sense to literary content requires working through representations that call on us to explore life at a level of detail and precision that our less dramatic encounters with our world rarely afford. Since the representations we are put in touch with in literary experience are typically so complex, so rich in detail and texture, they very often have the air of *novelty*: we see in them something not quite seen before. This is not to say that whenever we come upon a literary representation, we see a form of human activity or experience hitherto unknown to us. This is surely too strong. Rather, our sense of the complexity of these representations resides largely in the fact that as much as we might recognize familiar aspects of human life in literary worlds—our everyday emotional, moral, social, and similar practices and experiences—we find that in literature these already known regions of reality tend to suggest deeper layers of meaning and hint at broader patterns of about-ness and significance. When placed in the context of a literary work, these regions of our world commonly say, as Umberto Eco puts it, "I mean more"—more, at any rate, than we had once thought.[24] Accordingly, critics, if they are to conquer this complexity, must struggle to give voice to these more profound reserves of meaning and about-ness literature reveals our characteristically human practices to store.

So here is the question I think we must ask if we are to address the thesis of literary cognitivism: What is the value of having a textual tradition that presents such complex representations of life, and of having a critical practice that struggles to articulate their meaning? That is, what does a culture acquire in respect to its ability to give meaning, sense, to its world in virtue of this activity? To answer these questions, simply consider the value—and here I mean cognitive value—of a practice that involves us in the process of expanding our capacity to speak about human reality, of producing richer possibilities for investing it with meaning and significance. I think the response we should want to give is that the conversation that exists between literary works and our critical practices is one of the mechanisms by which a culture articulates a sense of its world, and thus that literary works and our critical traditions are mutually implicated in a practice that itself bears cognitive value. To confer meaning on something is to make it available to thought: it is to create sense, and thus understanding, where there once was none. If our literary-critical practices have a role to play in fleshing out our sense of human culture—of the meaning, of the significance, of various human practices and experiences—it would seem that they also have a rather important role to play in the expansion and refinement of our understanding of our shared world.

It is occasionally important to recall that, at least once upon a time, we were rather dumb animals, without much of substance to say about the nature of our world. Literary works in tandem with our critical practices represent a culture's search for—to borrow a phrase from Richard Eldridge—"expressive freedom."[25] That is, they represent our struggle to find ever more adequate ways of

rendering explicit what we take our world to be. By presenting to us visions of life on which we build more refined understandings of our way in the world, literature functions to expand the boundaries of what we can say about our world and our particular ways of finding ourselves in it. It is an activity, in short, that has a valuable role to play in the evolution of our expressive access to reality.

On this picture, our critical encounters with literature do not offer truth, at least not in the standard philosophical sense of the term. It would seem to be the philosopher's rather than the literary critic's business (or perhaps interest) to explore literary representations of life and ask whether they are also true, whether our world is *really* like that. The cognitive value of our literary-critical practices resides not in the deliverance of truth, but in the production and attempt to give sense to these visions themselves. We might call the sort of knowledge our critical practices gives us "humanistic" knowledge: knowledge of how we give meaning to various regions of human circumstance. This is not thereby to assign a worrisomely inferior status to these representations. Indeed, this activity enjoys a certain priority to the search for truth, at least, and perhaps only, in this respect: before we can query the truth of a representation of our way in the world, we must first have the representation itself. That is, what makes possible the search for truth is a prior cultural accomplishment: the construction of varying ways of taking our world to be.

Should we wish to be true to philosophical usage, we might opt not to call this knowledge at all, for it is knowledge that is not linked to "truth" or knowledge of the way our world really is. In this respect, it is a decidedly nonphilosophical sort of knowledge. Perhaps one will want to call the sort of cognitive achievement I am linking to critical achievements "understanding" instead of "knowledge," or some such thinned-down cognitive term. This is fine, though it is perhaps to give too much authority to standard philosophical usage. For if we want to show that we can treat our critical encounters with literature as having cognitive value, it should be enough to show that they engage us in the activity of trying to articulate an understanding of our way in the world. After all, this is what we commonly call the pursuit of knowledge. But I do not wish to take a stand here, except to say that if we decide not to use the term 'knowledge' to describe this achievement, this should not be understood to lessen the achievement itself.[26]

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1. The work of Eileen John can be read as an implicit exception to this claim. Her work is marked by an interest in showing that of those works of fiction that put on offer a form of philosophical or conceptual knowledge, the moment of cognitive acquisition "is apt to occur primarily in our responses to the work—such works call for the reader or audience to be philosophers." Eileen John, "Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 331–348; quote from p. 331. I take it that locating the mechanism of cognitive acquisition in our *responses* to a work of fiction—rather than in some feature of the text itself—is tantamount to situating it in our interpretive activities. In a few respects, this article can be read as an attempt to explore how we might develop John's claim explicitly in terms of a theory of interpretation.

2. For some of the more influential recitals of the arguments canvassed here, see Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 191–200; Gordon Graham, "Learning from Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 26–37; T. J. Diffey, "What Can We Learn from Art?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 204–211; Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). I developed a more sustained account of the problem than I offer here in "Between Truth and Triviality," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 224–237, and in *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

3. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* is still the classic statement of this view.

4. With "critical meaning" I introduce a term of art, and I intend it to refer only to the sort of critical activity I describe here. I use it as a broad concept that is intended to range over many of the varieties of meaning that we attribute to literary works that cannot be identified with the linguistic meaning of the works. Also, it might strike one as more natural to call this thematic meaning, but I have opted against this. Thematic meaning (and, I imagine, many cases of symbolic and metaphorical meaning) can at times be an instance of critical meaning—it will depend on the example—but it is too narrow a concept to capture what I am after, though there are obvious similarities.

5. For a clear and helpful overview of conventionalism and intentionalism in the theory of interpretation, see Robert Stecker, "Interpretation," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 1999). For an excellent critical discussion of intentionalism, see Daniel O. Nathan, "Art,

Meaning, and Artist's Meaning," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (New York: Blackwell, 2006).

6. For a popular account of a version of hypothetical intentionalism that gives a central role to the notion of an *audience* in imputing intentions that are in turn determinative of literary meaning, see Jerrold Levinson's "Intentions and Interpretation: A Last Look," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 1992), and his "Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies," in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?* ed. Michael Krausz (Penn State University Press, 2002).

7. See Monroe Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger.

8. Against this one might protest that there are cases when the interpreter comes upon a comment in (say) an author's autobiographical notes that suggests a way of critically interpreting a work by this author. This is true, but these cases are relatively rare. For this reason, it would be simply silly to claim that an interpretive activity as central as critical interpretation is *always* occasioned by some such discovery regarding an author's intentions, as though for every plausible critical interpretation we come upon we think that there must be implicit reference to a discovery of this sort.

9. For the classic statement of this, see Colin Lyas, "Wittgensteinian Intentions," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger.

10. Bernard Harrison, "Imagined Worlds and the Real One," in *The Literary Wittgenstein,* ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 93.

11. The phrase "fictional world" is used here in a generic sense. There are many accounts of the nature of fictional worlds currently on offer, and I would like to keep my account broad enough so that it can sit comfortably with many of them. For a helpful discussion of various ways philosophers give sense to the idea of a fictional world, see Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 57–69.

12. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

13. I offer as evidence of this claim that in two of the most prominent anthologies on interpretation in analytic aesthetics—Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* and Krausz, ed., *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?*—none of the contributors concern themselves with the fictionality (what I call the world-generating capacity) of literary works and the implications this has for our interpretive encounters with them, with one exception. The exception is Alan Goldman's "The Sun Also Rises: Incompatible Interpretations," in Krausz, whose influence on my thinking here I take this opportunity to acknowledge.

14. Betrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 275.

15. Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 326.

16. Cleanth Brooks, "Man, Time, and Eternity," reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 292.

17. It is here at the level of linguistic interpretation that questions arise concerning whether an interpreter simply recovers the world of a work or always partly constructs it. This is where the problem of relativism begins to appear, and I have neither the space nor the interest to pursue it here. My only claim is that critical interpretation is not concerned with constructing (or recovering) the world of a work, but rather with making sense of the world once constructed (or recovered).

18. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 11.

19. See Lamarque and Olsen's discussion of a "fictive stance" in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, pp. 43–46.

20. Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from the Underground," in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 95.

21. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 22.

22. For discussions of this, see Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction*.

23. This is a hallmark of Kendall Walton's influential theory of make-believe in his *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.

24. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 27.

25. Richard Eldridge, *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1997). See especially the chapter "Wittgenstein's Writerliness and Its Repressions" for a discussion of this idea.

26. I thank Thomas Leddy and Robert Stecker for comments on the first draft of this article. A version nearer the one published here was read at the *Kunst und Kognition* symposium in Erfurt, Germany, in June 2005, and I thank those in attendance for the lively discussion, especially Richard Eldridge, Catherine Elgin, Wolfgang Huemer, Peter Lamarque, and Luca Pocci. A very warm word of appreciation is owed to some of my colleagues at Temple for offering a patient audience for the ideas developed here. I am especially grateful to Susan Feagin, Robert Guay, and Joe Margolis.