What stories mean*

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Abstract

Ordinary readers and literary scholars take it for granted that stories mean something – not just that the words used to tell them mean something but that stories themselves have meaning. Using Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse as my main source of examples, I present an account of story-meaning involving the basic operations of generalisation, abstraction, universalisation and application. I also discuss questions about whose meaning story-meaning is – does it belong to the author, the reader or to the story itself? – and about the motivation for using stories as vehicles of meaning.

Introduction

> "Driven by hunger, a fox tried to get at some grapes upon a lofty vine. He leaped up at them with all his might repeatedly, and when he found that he could not reach them he said, on going away: "you are not yet ripe; I do not chose to eat sour grapes."
>
> Those who speak slightingly of things that they themselves cannot achieve will do right to put their own name on this parable."

There are numerous versions of the story about the Fox and the Grapes, from Aesop and on. This one is from Phaedrus, translated by B. E. Perry. Phaedrus tells a simple story about a fox and some grapes, and then he tells us what it means. Not what the *words* mean that he uses to tell the story – we must already know that to know that it is a story about a fox and some grapes – but what the *story* means. It is such meaning that this paper is about. I will soon go on to more sophisticated examples, but I will stick with the fable for a little while, and use it to introduce some of the questions I

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want to discuss and some of the concepts I want to use. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that all stories carry didactic messages in the same way as the fable. But I hope to show that the mechanisms that account for the meaning of the fable are also at work in a wide range of other cases, from the anecdotes of journalism right up to real literary interpretation. So, if all this seems a bit simplistic at first, please bear with me for a while.

A first question is this: how does Phaedrus know what the story means? Has he *discovered* the meaning, or has he *decided* what it means? Or, to put it differently: is it Phaedrus that means something *by* the story, or is it the story itself that means something?

To sharpen that first question a little bit we can compare Phaedrus' version with La Fontaines' rendering of the same fable. Though embellished with a little more detail, the story itself is substantially the same, but the moral is rather different: "Is it [the fox' behavior] not better than to complain?"[1] If we don't read him as ironic, La Fontaine seems to find the fox more worthy of praise than blame.

Our two authors use the same story to carry two different messages, so obviously there is some leeway involved. But there is, nevertheless, a rather intimate relation between the story and the message: the same story cannot be used to express just any message. Immediately after "The Fox and the Grapes", in the Phaedrus collection, comes the story about the Horse and the Boar:

> A wild boar in wallowing muddied the shallow water where a horse was accustomed to quench his thirst. The result was a quarrel between them. He of the sounding hoof, enraged at the beast, sought the help of a man, and, taking him up on his back returned, elated, against his enemy. When the knight with his weapons had killed this enemy he is said to have spoken as follows to the horse: "I am very glad to have brought you help in response to your entreaties; for I have captured a prize, and have come to know how useful you are." And so he compelled the horse in spite of himself to submit to the reins. Then, in deep dejection, the horse said to himself: "I was a fool; while looking for revenge in a small matter, I have found slavery for myself."
>
> This fable will warn hot-tempered men that it is better to suffer an injury with impunity than to put one's self in the power of another.

It would be difficult to tie the moral of this story to "The Fox and the Grapes",

[1] Fit-il pas mieux que de se plaindre ?

or the reverse. Note also how Phaedrus routinely uses phrases like "the fable will warn" instead of saying what he himself wants to tell us by it. So here's a second question: what is the connection between the story told and its *sens moral*? By what route are we expected to travel from the sign (the story) to its meaning?

We can compare this sort of case with the ordinary meaning of linguistic expressions used by an author. In this case, too, we distinguish between what the words themselves mean and what the author uses them to mean. In this case the centre of attention is normally the author's meaning: should we have reason to believe that the author uses words in non-standard ways the author's meaning prevails. But normally one means what one says: one intends one's words to mean what they conventionally mean, and one intends the reader to use her knowledge about the conventional meaning to find out what one intends to say. In short: the author intends the reader to travel from the sign to the meaning by means of the vehicle of linguistic convention.

By means of what vehicle is one supposed to go from the fable to the *sens moral*? What is, to use Paul Grice's expression, the "mode of correlation" that connects the sign with its meaning?[2] Basically, of course, it is a sort of *generalisation*: elements of the tale are made to represent *genera* of which they are instances. The Fox represents anyone at all, the grapes represent something worthy of desire, the sourness of the grapes represent some defect in what is desired, that makes it less worthy of effort, etc.

These generalisations are common to Phaedrus and La Fontaine, so why do they put such different value on the Fox's behaviour? Do they have different opinions about the same thing, so that they each like what the other dislikes, or are they talking about different things? Different things, it seems. Phaedrus dislikes the projection of one's own shortcomings onto the object, slandering something without reason. La Fontaine appreciates the capacity to adapt one's wishes to reality, and not to waste energy on needless complaint. Such valuations, of course, are important to this sort of interpretation, generally: where to put the emphasis, what is taken as important, how light and shadow are distributed.

Nevertheless, while there is a latitude for different assigments of story-meaning to the same story, it seems clear that stories are not "arbitrary" signs for what they signify – the fable is a "motivated", or even a "natural", signifier of its *sens moral*. Some may think that this difference is too important to allow the use of the same terminology ('meaning', 'signfication'

[2]Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, s 103f.

etc.) in both cases, while others may think that the difference is rather trite and that one kind of signification is roughly as arbitrary or motivated as the other. Myself, I believe that the distinction is important, but that we still have to do with two species of a common genus.

A third question with regard to story-meaning is this. Why use a story to convey your message, instead of formulating it directly? The question seems extra relevant with regard to the classic fable, which usually expresses its *sens moral* twice, both implicitly, in the story, and explicitly, but the same question may be asked with regard to any attempt to find or convey a figurative or implied sense in a story. Why take the detour via the story if all you want to say is *this*?

I shall hint at three answers to this question here, and come back to it towards the end. The first answer is rather obvious, even in the simple world of the fable. The story does not just convey the message, it is also meant to strengthen it by giving *reasons* and *evidence* for accepting it. Allusions to this function of the anecdote as evidence for the *sens moral* is very common in the fables themselves. The transition from the story to the moral is often effected by formulas of the type "this fable shows us that . . . ", or sometimes the moral is given first and the story follows it as a verification: "this is shown by the following story..."

It is not difficult to see how the fable may be taken as evidence for its message. As I said, the fable expresses something general by means of a specific example, it is a *paradigma* or *exemplum*, as Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric*. But the *semiotic* relation between a generalisation and an *exemplum* is close kin to an *epistemological* relation: the inductive support conferred upon a general proposition by its instances.

I think this confusion of a semiotic with an epistemological function of stories is important, both for explaining how stories affect their addressees and, in simple cases, why those who issue them choose this particular form to convey their messages. But it is also important that it is a confusion, and may even amount to a sort of conjuring trick. The type of evidence involved has a telling name in the philosophy of science: it is "anecdotal" evidence and is something to guard oneself against, rather than to trust or to use. It is easy to see why: that one can find *one* confirming instance of a general principle doesn't say much, and even less if one is allowed, as in fiction, to make it up oneself.[3]

[3]Again, there is a world of difference between directly ideological uses of stories, ranging from gossip and propaganda, to ideologically imbued journalism, popular fiction and Hollywood films, on the one hand, and serious artistic uses of narrative, on the other. The function of a novel – likeVirginia Woolf's *To the lighthouse*, which will furnish much of the material for what follows – is not to supply invented evidence for a foregone conclusion.

A second reason to use a story to transmit a message, rather than just stating it explicitly, is the function of the story as an *alibi* for the message. When challenged, the teller can always retreat to the stance of "it's just a story" – and even, if the story used as a vehicle for the message happens to be true, to "that's just the way it happened".[4]

A third motivation, more relevant to artistic narration, for taking the "detour" via the example to the generalisation, is related to what classical rhetorical theory calls "catachresis" (though the word is used for other things as well, of course). The standard way to describe a *trope* in classical rhetoric is as a kind of *substitution*: for aesthetic or other reasons a *literal* expression for something is subsituted by a metaphorical or metonymic, etc, expression. But sometimes a trope is used to signify something for which there is no literal expression – in those cases the problem of motivating the detour through the figurative does not arise, as there simply is no other way to go. This creative use of the tropes is what Quintilianus and others call catachresis, and the notion may be extended to other forms of figurative speech.

Appearances notwithstanding, this more creative motivation for the use of stories may be applicable even to the simple case of the fable. The literal formulation of the message may only give a rough hint about the relevant interpretation, and in many cases an allusion to the fable is taken up into ordinary language as a sign for a complex phenomenon which otherwise would lack a simple expression – as is exemplified in English by the expression "sour grapes". In the case of more subtle literary storytelling one would, of course, expect this element of semiotic creativity to dominate the picture.

Generalisation, abstraction, universalisation, application

Before going on to more complex examples, I must say a little more about what I, so far, have rather sloppily called 'generalisation'. There are, in fact, several different operations hidden under this umbrella and for what follows it is important to keep them apart. I will keep the lable 'generalisation' for one of them, the others will be called 'specification', 'abstraction', 'application' and 'universalisation', respectively.

Generalisation first. The opposite of generalisation is *specification*, and both operations are grounded in the relations of subordination and superor-

Rather, it offers us a unique way to draw on our experience and our imaginative resurces in thinking about life and the world. Yet the basic mechanisms are the same.

[4]The term "alibi" for this phenomenon comes from Roland Barthes, who makes a lot of it in *Mythologies*. Cf. "Le myth aujourd'hui", *Oeuvres complètes*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1993, s 693f.

dination of concepts, in conceptual hierarchies of the Aristotelian kind. To generalise an assertion is to substitute more general terms for more specific ones, to move "up" the relevant conceptual trees. A generalised version of The Fox and the Grapes may look like this:

> An agent noticed a desired object and made an effort to acquire it, but failed, and therefore concluded that the object was not very valuable, after all.

Generalisation (and specification) are operations in the world of ideas, founded as they are on relations between concepts. *Abstraction*, on the other hand, is an operation that takes us from the real world to the world of ideas: it takes an assertion and turns it into a predicate, by replacing names of individuals with variables, that will be eligible for quantification or replacement by other names (by the reverse operation of *application*). If we abstract over the generalisation of The Fox and the Grapes, above, we get something like this:

> The relation between x and y, such that: x is an agent that notices y, y is an object desired by x, x makes an effort to acquire y, but fails, and x concludes that y is not very valuable, after all.[5]

In this terminology, we can say that the *sens morale* that Phaedrus gives for "The Fox and the Grapes" is generated from the story by a combination of generalisation, abstraction, and application. First, one generalises as above, second one removes the relevant individuals by abstraction, and third, if one belongs to the intended target group ("those who speak slightingly of things that they themselves cannot achieve") one applies the constructed predicate to oneself and some relevant object of one's desire.[6]

To explain *universalisation* we look to our other fable, about the Horse and the Boar. Phaedrus gives its *sens moral* in roughly the same form as for "The Fox and the Grapes": he wants "hot-tempered men" to generalise, abstract and apply to themselves. But there is another possibility that, perhaps, is better suited to this case – it would emphasize a general lesson rather than a personal application:

> To make an alliance with a stronger partner in order to conquer a third party, will often lead to submission under the partner.

[5]This, roughly, is what logicians call "lambda-abstraction".

[6]The order between generalisation and abstraction does not matter. In some cases one will also want to introduce a stage of specification on the way "down" to the application.

To generate this message one starts, as before, with generalisation and abstraction. But instead of proceeding with an application to some other individual (for example oneself), one quantifies over the variables produced by the abstraction. The result is an assertion claiming to be valid (within a certain domain) in *every* case, or *many* cases or *some* cases, etc. This is what I call universalisation.[7]

To the Lighthouse

It is time to leave the fable. Before coming back to some more general reflections, towards the end, I want to broaden the inductive basis and introduce some other examples, and I will take them all from the same source, namely Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

First a few words to remind us of the story. The novel has three parts. Part 1 (The Window) and part 3 (The Lighthouse) each tells about events within a single day, separated by many years. Part 2 (Time Passes) narrates, in a different style and tempo, what happens in between. The trip to the lighthouse, alluded to by the title, is discussed but not undertaken in part 1; in part 3 it is carried out. The story is about the Ramsay family, mostly about Mr and Mrs Ramsay, and their guests in the family summer house, somewhere on the coast of Scotland. The narrative technique is mostly different forms of inner monologue and "stream of consciousness" narration, from different points of view, but it is not difficult to piece together a picture of the main events.

This will have to suffice as an indication of what the story *is*. I will come back to some specific episodes when the need arises, but first I will open the question about what the story *means*. Tempting as it may be, I will not produce meanings out of my own hat, but will just pick some suggestions from the very extensive litterature engendered by the novel. I will start with a few examples to illustrate the notions of generalisation and universalisation. Here is one thesis about what *To the Lighthouse* is about:

> Virgina Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is a study of personality, of the relationship between the sexes, of time, death, nature and art.[8]

The basis for this assertion is, of course, that the story is about some persons of different sex, that time passes, that some of the persons die, that

[7] One special case here is what might be called "essential quantification", using the quantifier "typically".

[8] Sharon Kaehle och Howard German , "To the Lighthouse: Symbol and Vision", *Bucknell Review*, x (May 1962) 328-46, reprinted in Morris Beja (red), *To the Lighthouse. A Casebook*, Macmillan, London 1970, pp 189-209. Quote on p 189.

one thinks and talks some about death, that there are artists in the story, e.g., a painter and a poet, that produce works of art, of which Lily Briscoe's painting of Mrs Ramsay is the most important. The same scholars develop their reading a little further:

> Part I of *To the Lighthouse* deals with ideas about personality, the relationship between the sexes, and modes of escape from time. Primarily, these ideas are expressed through the Ramsays, whom Mrs Woolf has endowed with qualities she believed typical of the basic masculine and feminine characters. Their traits are complementary: Mrs Ramsay's creative, intuitive femininity balances her husband's courageous, intellectual masculinity.[9]

I think we all recognize this sort of description. My general impression is that it is very common for critics and literary scholars to point to general and universalisable themes of this nature, that the literary work is supposed to treat in the guise of a specific and particular story. I would even venture the hypothesis that it is (almost) a necessary condition for a literary work to be taken as art that it allows readings of roughly this nature.[10]

But even if almost every interpretation of *To the Lighthouse* contains generalisations of roughly the same type as above, they differ very markedly with regard to the generalised content. Here is another suggestion:

> *To the Lighthouse* is really the story of a contest between two kinds of truth – Mr Ramsay's and Mrs Ramsay's. For him, truth is factual truth; for her, truth is the movement toward truth: since truth is always being made, and never is made, the struggle for truth is the truth itself. The form of this novel at once expresses and verifies Mrs. Ramsay's truth.[11]

The interpreter goes on to attach this theme to Bergson, and the Bergsonian opposition between "matter" and "memory": we learn, for example, that Mr Ramsay is matter while Lily Briscoe is memory.

[9] Kaehle och German p 190.

[10] To take an example from another medium, one may think about what happens to a photo when it is transformed, so to speak, into art. And also what happens when abstraction and generalisation is blocked by supplying the names and personal histories of depicted persons.

[11] James Hafley, "The Creative Modulation of Perspective", in Morris Beja (red), *To the Lighthouse. A Casebook*, Macmillan, London 1970, s 133-148. Quote on p 137f. (The chapter is an extract from *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1954.)

Both interpretations are encompassing readings of the novel, based on different generalisations, within which details can be more or less finely elaborated. My next example is rather different. It seems to be a common opinion that Mr and Mrs Ramsay not only represent the male and the female, or some other such abstractions, but that they also represent a couple of very concrete and non-fictional persons, namely Virginia Woolf's parents. Here's what Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister, writes in a letter to the author, after reading the novel:

> It seems to me that in the first part of the book you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. /.../ You have given father too I think as clearly, but perhaps, I may be wrong, that isn't quite so difficult.[12]

This is a reading of the novel which Virgina Woolf seems to have happily accepted, and it is not only current in the circle of her family and friends. In biographical accounts of people in and around the Bloomsbury group one refers, seemingly without hesitation, to Woolf's portrait of her father, Leslie Stephen, in *To the Lighthouse*, and compares the picture she gives there with what she herself or others say about him in other contexts.

If the first group of readings, those of the critics and scholars, are of the type generalisation-abstraction-universalisation, then Vanessa Bell's reading is of the type generalisation-abstraction-application. The pivotal point for her reading is a similarity between the fictitious Ramsays and the real parents of the sisters. To perceive this similarity is to generalise, to some appropriate level, on the basis of features that Mr and Mrs Ramsay have – to turn them into *types*, of which Leslie Stephen and his wife may be taken as instances.

Universalising readings are, as I said, ever-present in literary scholarship and criticism, while applications are much less common. But it would be wrong to conclude from this, I think, that applications are less important for ordinary reading – it's just that they are seldom made public. It is no coincidence that Vanessa Bell formulates her reading in a letter to somebody, her sister, who can be expected to share the individual experiences it involves. When we read literature, we don't just extract general lessons och complex conceptions from it, we also apply these conceptions to things

[12] *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, vol III, Hogarth, London 1977, s 572.

from our own experience, and these applications, of course, also influence the generalisations we make.

Particularly striking examples of applicatory readings are furnished by poetry and song lyrics. Here is a Tom Petty song:

> Well I won't back down, no I won't back down
> You can stand me up at the gates of Hell
> But I won't back down
>
> No I'll stand my ground, won't be turned around
> And I'll keep this world from draggin' me down
> Gonna stand my ground and I won't back down
>
> Well I know what's right, I got just one life
> In a world that keeps on pushin me around
> But I'll stand my ground and I won't back down

It is pretty clear, I think, that this is not to be taken as a message *from* the singer or writer *to* the listener *about* anything, in that case we would need at least some information of the context – what is he talking about? Instead, you are supposed to make the utterance you own – to sing along, so to speak, while supplying material from your own life. The song is ready-made utterance for you to use. (At the website where I copied the lyrics, there was an interesting comment from some other user: "this is not a song, it's a prayer". Think of the Lords Prayer: how many times has it been used by different speakers to express different and sometimes very personal and sincere messages?)

Another type of interpretation where application is the ultimate goal is juridical interpretation, especially in case law. Hans-Georg Gadamer has often asserted the paradigmatic status of juridical hermeneutics in this respect.[13]

(In post-modern criticism, it is often asserted that multiplicity of meaning – to be susceptible to many different interpretations – is an aesthetic value in itself. In general, I think that this is very wrong – artists usually aim for precision rather than ambiguity, and one interesting reading is better than many trite ones. But for applications there is something to it.)

[13] Cf. for example the chapter "Die exemplarische Bedeutung der Juristichen Hermeneutik", p 307-323 in *Wahrheit und Methode*, 4. Auflage, Tübingen 1975.

Overinterpretation

To suggest something of the latitude utilised by different readers, I will point in passing to a much wilder interpretation of *To the Lighthouse* and say something about how it can be fitted into the categories I have used.

At least one scholar has claimed that *To the Lighthouse* is an elaborate allegory based on the Bible.[14] According to this reading Mrs Ramsay is, at the same time, Eve, the Virgin Mary and Christ; Mr Ramsay is God the Father; the lighthouse is the garden of Eden and Paradise; the three rays of light from the lighthouse are the Trinity, and among them the last and longest one is the Holy Spirit, and so on. Here, as an example, is an argument that the dinner party at the end of part 1 is to be read as an allegorical rendering of the Last Supper:

> Although there are ten people in the Ramsay family, and they have six guests, at the dinner - as at the Last Supper - only thirteen people appear. Mrs Ramsay represents Christ serving his twelve disciples at the Last Supper. She, like Christ, is soon to die.[15]

In the absence of strong external evidence, it is natural, I think, to take this as an *overinterpretation*, and I want to say a few words about the possible import of that accusation. The generalisations by which the interpreter travels from Virginia Woolf's novel to the Bible are for the most part, as in the quoted passage, shallow and uninteresting in themselves – arbitrary keys to a code – while all the heavy content flows the other way, and fills the empty form that the novel turns out to be. Compare this reading with Vanessa Bell's. Her experience is that the novel gives a rich and subtle characterisation of two persons, which when it is applied to her parents lets them appear in a new and rewarding way. Overcarsh reading, to the contrary, does not let *To the Lighthouse* tell us anything interesting about christian mythology or the persons in the Bible – it is the Bible which is applied to the novel, rather than the reverse.

Stories as parts of stories

So far, I have discussed total readings of *To the Lighthouse*, taking the book as *one* story. But like all novels it is made up of smaller stories that, in turn,

[14] F. L. Overcarsh, in the article "The Lighthouse, Face to Face", Accent, 10, Winter 1950: 107-23, reprinted in Eleanor McNees (red), *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments*, vol III, Helm Information, Mountfield 1994.

[15] Overcarsh, p 498.

have stories as parts. I shall touch upon two such part-stories, and reflect a little on the sort of meaning they may carry.

My first example is a short passage from part 3. In spite of being so short it is a separate section by itself, and furthermore detached from the context by being surrounded by brackets.The narrated episode takes place on the little boat in which Mr Ramsay and his childen are finally on their way to the lighthouse. There are two more persons on the boat: a fisherman, MacAlister, and his son.

> [MacAlister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was alive still) was thrown back into the sea.][16]

Situated where it is, the passage seems to cry out for a symbolic reading. It is not there to move the plot along, or to characterise some person or situation in the story. It must have some wider import connecting it with the general theme of the book, whatever that may be. But what does it mean? What elements in it are message-relevant and worthy of generalisation? That the fish is still alive when the piece is cut out of it, and that it still lives when it is thrown back into the sea? Surely. That the cut-out piece is square and is to be used as bait? Maybe. This is what one reader says:

> The short sixth section, within brackets, tells how "MacAlister's boy" cuts a chunk out of a live fish to bait his hook, then throws the fish back into the sea. The symbolic significance of this epiphany is not overwhelmingly obvious. But placed as it is within Lily's anguished attempt to evoke Mrs Ramsay, it seems to suggest the sudden wounding of the artist's consciousness which stimulates creativity.[17]

Not an unreasonable suggestion, maybe, but it is not evident how it can be carried through in detail. Is the artist=the fish (the wounded)? But then, what about the use of the cut-out as bait? Does it point to the practical, utilitarian person that wounds the artist for his own gain? But is it not as possible to take the artist as the boy, cutting a piece out of life to fish with it?

This is not the place to answer such questions, I just want to note in passing that the mechanism of generalisation, abstraction, universalisation

[16]Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, The Hogarth Press, London 1951, s 277f.

[17]Howard Harper, *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virgina Woolf*, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press 1982, sid 142.

and application seems to be the same as before, and point to the margin for different choices. (I will come back to the question of what can make such choices right or wrong, towards the end of the paper.)

There is also another noteworthy "ambiguity" in this episode. In the last-quoted passage it is concentrated in the expression "the artist's consciousness". Does this have an external reference, either to artists in general (universalisation) or to Virginia Woolf (application)? Or does it have an internal application, for example to Lily Briscoe? The different readings don't cancel each other, of course, but there is still a point in distinguishing them.

Generalisation and totalisation

The previous example raised the question about the relevant domain for quantification and application – is it outside or inside the world of the story? With regard to total readings, of the sort we started out with, external domains have priority. In the case of MacAlister's boy both possibilities are open, and possibly intended by the author as well. But the reading of a novel also involves assigning readings to various episodes where the relevant domain is clearly within the story-universe.

On one occasion, narrated in *To the Lighthouse*, mr Ramsay finds an earwig in his milk. He is furious and throws bowl, milk and earwig ut of the window. Here as well, the anecdote has some other function than to move the action on, it's place in the chronology of the plot is unimportant. But it is not *symbolic*, in the way the event with the fish seems to be. It is a *characterising* episode. With its aftermath it grows in importance, by and by, and adds to the characterisation not only of Mr Ramsay, but also of his wife and the relation between them.

> He had built round him such a fence of sanctity, and occupied the space with such a demeanour of majesty that an earwig in his milk was a monster.[18]

What sort of reading is this? A first thought might be that it is a case of generalisation without abstraction, and so without universalisation or application. We keep the object, Mr Ramsay, constant, and take his behaviour as an example of a general trait that we take to be characteristic of him.

Generalisation moves from species to genus, but in this case there is an alternative way to take the interpretive move: as a movement from *part* to *whole*, we may call it *totalisation*. Taken in this way, the episode of the

[18] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* p 306

earwig is a “characteristic detail” in the bigger whole that is mr Ramsays behaviour and the sum of his relations to the world.

In this case the distinction between generalisation and totalisation is perhaps a distinction without a difference. It does not matter much if we think of Mr Ramsay's character as a type with the earwig episode as an instance, or as a whole with the same episode as a part. In other cases, where it is less easy to think of the relevant whole as a recurring pattern, the difference may be more important, but I will say no more about it here.

Whose meaning?

So far, the discussion has been dominated by the second of the three questions that I posed at the beginning: about the ”mode of connection” between the story and its meaning. I will come back to the third question in the last section, about the motivation for using stories to convey messages, but first I want to say something about the first question: whose meaning is it? Does it pertain primarily to the *author*, to the *story* itself, or to the *reader*? A good way to start that discussion is perhaps with a well known comment by Virginia Woolf herself, about the symbolic meaning of the lighthouse:

> I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions - which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.

Taken at face value, and applied to the novel as a whole, this means that none of the readings I have mentioned corresponds to the author's intention. But they do not necessarily go *against* her intentions, either: she intends the reader to produce readings that in certain dimensions add signfication to whatever meaning she herself intended.

Let me introduce a couple of technical terms. In each interpretation we can distinguish between a *reading* and a *claim*.[19] We understand, e.g., that Hanfley reads *To the Lighthouse* as a discussion of two types of truth,

[19]The distinction is elaborated in Carlshamre, S., “Types of types of interpretation”, in Carlshamre, S. and Pettersson, A., editors, *Types of Interpretation in the Aesthetic Disciplines*, McGill-Queen's University Press 2003.

while Overcarsh reads it as an allegorical presentation of Christian doctrine, based on the Bible. But in saying that, I imply nothing about what claim they make on behalf of their respective reading – for example whether they claim that it corresponds to something that Woolf intended. In practice, literary interpreters are seldom very explicit about what claims they make for their readings, but when they actually are, they often refer to the author's meaning. Here's Overcarsh again:

> Since the Lighthouse is used as a symbol, it could of course imply many things; but it has, I feel, a single intended essential symbolical meaning. Using the method of Joyce in *Ulysses*, in *To the Lighthouse* Virginia Woolf was writing a novel with the overtones of an epic. The work is an allegory, with possible reference to various literature, but based principally on the bible.[20]

Once again, the comparison with ordinary linguistic meaning is instructive. We usually take it for granted that the meaning we ascribe to words and expressions in a text correspond both to the relevant linguistic conventions and to the author's intentions – we expect the author to use the conventions to get her intentions across. But the conventional meaning, in the standard case, has no independent interest for us: in the case of a perceived conflict between convention and intention the intention takes precedence. One reason for this, of course, is the arbitrariness of linguistic conventions – precisely because a word in itself could be used to mean anything, there is not much point in seeking meanings for it apart from what someone in fact used it to mean.

With motivated significations, of the type we are interested in now, the case is different. Take the characterizing episode as an example. Without falling into arbitrariness, we can speculate about what the epsiode with the earwig says about Mr Ramsay, independently of what the author wants us to think. We argue from it in just the same way as we would have argued if the anecdote had been true of some real person. We might "read" a real act by a real person, say Leslie Stephens, in just the same way as we read the fictitious act of the fictive Mr Ramsay.

But there is an important difference, of course, about what would make our reading *correct* in the real and the fictive case. In the real case, we would be right if Leslie Stephen actually had the character trait that we ascribe to him on the basis of the episode. In the fictive case there is no such possibility: as there simply is no Mr Ramsay, there are no character traits that he really has either. The claim to say something true about Mr

[20] Overcarsh, p 494.

Ramsay, in this sense, is spurious, and would just prove that one has not understood that one is reading a piece of fiction. So what claims are possible in the fictive case?

One possibility, of course, is the claim that the reading corresponds to the author's intention: that Woolf intended us to read the episode this way. Another possibility is the *counterfactual* claim: that this is what a real person, which in other respects fits what we "believe" about Mr Ramsay, would be like. These claims are not incompatible or exclusive: just like Woolf counts on our knowledge of English to transmit what she intends by her words, she counts on our general understanding of people to convey an image of her persons through characterizing episodes. But they may fall apart: my views about people and human behavior may be different enough from Woolf's for us to reach different conclusions when reflecting on Mr Ramsay and the earwig. That would not make my reading false or incorrect. What would be false is just the claim that it accords with the author's intentions – readings are not true or false, it takes a claim (of certain types) for the question about truth and falsity to arise.

The same thing can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the intentional and the conventional claim with regard to linguistic meaning, but there is an important difference: the reading that I counterfactually prefer in the literary case does not automatically yield to the intended reading, in case of conflict, but retains its independent interest. What accounts for this difference? Two factors, I think.

The first factor is the motivated character of story-meaning. Because the connection between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, in this case, there is room for an argument, and there really is a sense in which the author's meaning is "just another interpretation".

The second, related, factor is that saying things by means of stories is not linguistic communication in the full Gricean sense. According to Grice's analysis, which I take to be roughly correct for standard linguistic communication, meaning something by what I say involves intending to influence my audience in a certain way, by means of the audience's recognition of that very intention. In contrast, when Virginia Woolf tells us the episode about the earwig she, presumably, intends to affect us in a certain way – she intends to influence our perception of Mr Ramsay. But she does not intend our recognition of her intention to be the vehicle of that influence, she intends the story to "speak for itself". Indeed, she may prefer us not to recognize her intention at all, because that recognition may weaken the intended effect, by putting us on our guard: "Man merkt die Absicht, und man ist verstimmt."

There are complications, of course, and one such is the extent to which

the reading of a part-story may depend upon the fact that it is precisely a part of a larger story, and of its location within this larger framework. In comparing a real and a fictional variant of the earwig episode, I ignored this difference – the real episode does not have a framing story, although, of course, it has a context. At least in certain general ways, our knowledge that an episode belongs to a novel affects the way we read it. We know, for example, that episodes in a novel tend to have a significance, so we are not likely to dismiss Mr Ramsay's behavior as haphazard or untypical of him. It may be important whether the episode occurs at the beginning or at the end of the novel – the probability that its function is to characterize is bigger at the beginning, while our tendency to take it as a part of the plot maybe stronger if it occurs towards the end. It seems likely that such considerations contain hidden references to the intentions of the author: we take the story as an artifact, shaped for a certain purpose.

An even clearer example of this phenomenon is "McAlister's boy". The symbolic readings suggested by that episode are evidently conditioned by the context. But in what ways does the context influence the interpretation? Roughly like this, I think: the chosen reading shall be part of the best explanation for the episode being part of the novel. Whatever explanation that is, it is presumably an intentional explanation, referring to what somebody wanted to achieve by placing it there.

Who is this "somebody"? Had we never heard of literary theory, we would surely take it for granted that it is the real author, Virginia Woolf. And if the "best" explanation is to be the *real* explanation that answer must presumably be correct. But as we actually have heard of literary theory, we come to think about other possibilities, more or less ghostlike personalities that are often taken to play the role in which naive readers cast the real author: the "implied", the "hypothetical" or even the "fictitious" author. And in a case like this, it may admittedly be reasonable to think in terms of an idealised rather than a real authorial intention: the "best" explanation is perhaps the one that makes the novel best, rather than the one that best explains it.[21]

I shall not go further into the problems and nuances of such questions here, but only note that there are important differences between significations that seem relatively independent of a surrounding story and significations that are only accessible through their place in an intentionally crafted whole. This difference seems to be related to another difference between the episodes with the earwig and the fish. As I said, the earwig episode might have a real counterpart, that we could interpret in roughly the same way,

[21]Explicit claims to this effect are made by Gregory Currie, e.g. in "Interpretation and Objectivity", *Mind*, Vol. 102, 407, July 1993.

but this does not seem to be the case with the fish episode. The latter is a "motivated" sign without being a "natural" sign – real episodes do not carry symbolic meanings.

Why tell stories?

I shall end by reconnecting to the third question that I raised at the beginning. Why do we choose the "detour" by way of a story to communicate a message that could have been formulated in a more "direct" way – a philosophical message about time, or art, or truth or the relation between masculinity and femininity, perhaps? In this context I will stick to "external" significations, in the above sense, and I will of course not try to be exhaustive.

Within the framework I have presented, the "message" of a story can take one of two forms. Based on a complex predicate, forged from the story by generalisation and abstraction, one may proceed either to a) a *universalisation*, i.e., to an assertion claimed to be valid for all, many or some inidividuals within a certain domain, or to b) an *application* of the predicate to some particular individual, for example oneself. I will say a few words about each alternative, in turn.

What about universalisation? In connection with the fable, I pointed to the role of the story as evidence and alibi for the universalised message. Both roles are relevant also to the more subtle and complex stories represented by *To the Lighthouse*, and they may be said to blend and reinforce one another. Drawing general lessons from a story is a bit like learning something from one's own experience – one of the functions of literature is to be a stand-in for real experience. The fact that one seems to draw one's own conclusions from a concrete train of events gives these conclusions an air of credibility. But if the author's alibi doesn't work, this dimension of credibility is lost – instead of accepting the message on the evidence of the story, one will be inclined to ask about the reasons of the author.

When it comes to motivating applications, it is natural to point to the phenomenon that I called *catachresis*. If you see your mother in Mrs Ramsay, you gain access to a unique and subtle characterisation of her, which is accessible in no other way. The leeway for different generalisations that is built into the process is a condition for its success, of course: once a certain application is suggested, it governs what is taken as essential about the narrated persona, what features that are abstracted and how they are generalized.

And, of course, it is not always a particular application or universalisation that is important – often the point is to get access to the abstracted

"concept" in itself, so that you can then go on to use it in different ways. Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* gives us access to a conception of the "cellarman", that allows us to see features of ourselves and others that we would otherwise not take notice of, or be able to articulate as clearly – somewhat as a painter may help us to see patterns of light and shadow in our experience that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.