

Literary Interpretation is Not Just About Meaning

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The paper proposes a radical change of focus for understanding the fundamental purpose and value of literary interpretation. It criticises an orthodox view in analytical philosophy of literature, according to which theories of meaning in the philosophy of language, in particular Gricean or speech act or other pragmatic theories, offer the most illuminating way to grasp the relevant principles of interpretation. The argument here is that the application of such theories in this context is not just wrong in detail (this or that theory needs revising) but wrong in principle. The focus is wrong. The importation of philosophy of language distorts the essential character of interpretation, which should be seen as involving not so much meaning as value, not individual sentences but whole works, not obsessed with authorial intention but focused on the protocols of reading.

Keywords: Interpretation; “meaning of a work”; Derek Attridge; Noël Carroll; Robert Stecker; Kathleen Stock; Linguistic Fallacy; textual explication; subject; theme; literary value.

1. *Introduction*

Reflecting the title of this paper, my theme is largely a negative one: that when analytic philosophers turn their attention to literary interpretation more often than not they get distracted by their own familiar theories of meaning or intention or fiction and thus miss altogether the peculiar, sui generis features of interpretation, as widely practised, indeed the very features that give point and value to serious reflections on works of literature. It is no wonder that the philosophers’ terminology—utterer’s meaning, utterance meaning, modest actual intention-

alism, hypothetical intentionalism, truth in fiction, and so forth—has gained little traction within literary critical circles. Philosophers on this topic have been mostly talking to themselves. No doubt there are many reasons why analytic philosophy has been ignored by literary critics and theorists, not least their own captivation by other styles of philosophy and other kinds of intellectual concerns about literature itself. In fact, however, it is possible to detect some signs of rapprochement in this standoff—most notably in works by Derek Attridge (2015) and Terry Eagleton (2012)—with more interest in the theorists’ camp now shown to questions about value and aesthetics and ethics relating to literature. But I still do not see much interest in the imports from philosophy of language.

My own thought is that scepticism by literary critics about analytical approaches to meaning and intention in the literary sphere, to the extent that they pay them any attention at all, is largely justified. And I will try to say why. But my message is not entirely negative, and I will at least lightly sketch a picture of literary interpretation which breaks away from the philosophical paradigms of meaning and shifts its focus elsewhere: in a word, from meaning to value, from understanding to appreciation, from individual sentences to the achievements of whole works, from a focus on intention to reflection on the very practices of reading.

2. *Examples of literary interpretation*

To give all this some substance we need to know what we are talking about in addressing literary interpretation. The trouble is “interpretation” is a very loose, ill-defined term and covers different kinds of discourse and aims. But I suggest there is a familiar kind of commentary on works of literature that most would agree does exemplify literary interpretation even if there might be disagreement about how central or representative such cases are. Here are some examples to get us started:

If the personages are mostly bewitched by a false god [money], the novel [*Our Mutual Friend*] as a whole is a work of de-mystification. [...] This is accomplished first through the language of the narrator. The voice the reader hears is cool and detached. [...] This is especially apparent in the scenes of the Veneering dinner parties. These are described in the present tense, in language that is cold and withdrawn, terse, with an elliptical economy new in Dickens. Sometimes verbs and articles are omitted, and the reader confronts a series of nouns with modifiers which produces the scene before the mind’s eye as if by magical incantation: ‘Dining-room no less magnificent than drawing-room; tables superb; all the camels out, and all laden. Splendid cake, covered with Cupids, silver, and true-lovers’ knot.’ [...] The ironic detachment of such language makes the consciousness of the narrator (and of the reader) into a mirror uncovering the emptiness of the characters. The reader himself becomes the great looking-glass above the sideboard which shows what money has made of life. This mirror-like detachment to a

greater or lesser degree is the narrative perspective of the entire novel. It allows the reader to escape from the enchantment which holds the characters. (Miller 1964: 908–909)

Othello [...] is about male attitudes towards women—and each other—and thus Desdemona must stand as a symbol of what men destroy. [...] *Othello* is a profound examination of male modes of thought and behaviour, especially with regard to women and ‘feminine’ qualities. Iago is honest; he speaks the ordinary wisdom of the male world. The consequences of the values he shares with the other males in the play destroy the ‘feminine’ values held by Desdemona, above all, but also Othello, Emilia, Cassio, Roderigo. And Iago never changes. He remains. He endures without cracking, the only character in the play who never shows a sign of emotion or passion or the weakness he despises, although his behaviour clearly has to be motivated by passion. He talks about lust, but never shows any sign of it. The prime exponent of reason and control stands firm even as the world around him collapses, even knowing that he caused its collapse. Although tortures are promised, things that will make him speak word again, this brilliant verbal manipulator, this poet for whom silence is indeed punishment, stands alive at the end of the play, surrounded by bodies, and is, in our imagination, triumphant. (French 1992: 243)

*Do not fear Baas.
It's just that I appeared
And our faces met
In this black night that's like me.
Do not fear—
We will always meet
When you do not expect me.
I will appear
In the night that's black like me.
Do not fear—
Blame your heart
When you fear me—
I will blame my mind
When I fear you
In the night that's black like me.
Do not fear Baas,
My heart is as vast as the sea
And your mind as the earth.
It's awright Baas,
Do not fear.
("The Actual Dialogue" – by Mongane Wally Serote)*

‘Do not fear Baas’: the four words come from nowhere, or from the darkness of my pre-poem anticipation, unannounced, unlocated, unidentified; before I take them in as a statement, they brush against me in the dark as the physical signal of another human presence. Yet when I understand them as a meaningful sequence, they offer reassurance, seeming to know in advance the alarm that they will cause, and offer to allay it even as they produce it. [...] Somewhere in the background, further complicating the tonality, hovers

the angelic utterance, 'Fear not'. But it is not reassuring to have one's fears predicted, mapped out, at least not by the source of those fears. I have been seen, and seen through, while I remain in the dark. [...] [E]ach time I speak [the words in the poem] I have to choose a particular tone, setting a limit to the range of nuances that play across them. [...] This remains true of the following lines. 'It's just that I appeared': words of explanation and comfort, yet conveying the alarm of an encounter with an apparition, emerging suddenly out of nowhere—the nowhere that people of 'other' races inhabit in a racist culture. 'And our faces met': what could be simpler and more calming. Yet at the same time there is something disturbing about the notion of faces, rather than people, meeting. (Attridge 2004: 115–116)

We can note obvious differences in the passages. One refers to a novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, one to a play, *Othello*, and the third to a short lyric poem, "The Actual Dialogue" by Mongane Wally Serote. They represent different critical approaches: one broadly humanistic, one feminist, and one exemplifying what Derek Attridge calls the "singularity of literature."¹ And they highlight different aspects of the works they discuss: the narrative perspective of the novel, the attitudes of characters in the play, the mood and tone of the poem. But similarities outweigh the differences. Each is a recognizable instance of a familiar kind of literary criticism, in which particularities are given salience under broader themes, affording new perspectives on the works in question. They propose interesting ways of thinking about the works that might not be obvious on a superficial reading, and which potentially add to the rewards to be found in the works.

In spite of the familiarity of this kind of commentary, we should pause to note just how peculiar such discourse is when we stand back and reflect on it. After all, both the novel and the play are narratives with characters, a plot, dialogue, and so on, which in themselves are not difficult to discern and describe. With some attention, we know what is going on, who does what, who says what, what happens to the characters in question. This we might call the *subject* of the works—the stories told.

But the interpretations move well beyond an account of the subjects alone. They look, as it were, above or beyond the subject, to some further significance or interest, underlying it or arising from it: in a word they move from the subject level to the thematic level. And the points made are far from self-evident. After all, is it not strange to be told of *Our Mutual Friend* that "The reader himself becomes the great looking-glass above the sideboard which shows what money has made of life"; or to be told that "*Othello* is a profound examination of male modes of thought and behaviour" and that Iago, who we know in the story weaves a web of deception, is "honest" and "speaks the ordinary wisdom of the male world?" It is not as if the critics are incompetent or getting side-tracked. They are playing a different game. It is not

¹ Attridge also calls this style of criticism "minimal interpretation" (Attridge and Staten 2015).

the game of “what happens in the story?” It is the game of “what else is going on?” or “what sense can we make of this?” It is the same with the Serote poem. Picturing the scene described, grasping the subject, is not difficult. But the critic moves beyond that: he asks about his own visceral, affective, imaginative response prompted by the lines, why they move and disturb him, why he is drawn back to the poem, why it is worthy of further reflection, what value it has, why it has depth for all its surface simplicity.

Let me make one or two further initial observations about these interpretative commentaries. I have deliberately chosen fairly long quotations because any interpretation that merely makes a bald statement but fails to offer support is of little worth. As it is, these quotations are not complete in themselves but each part of a wider exploration of the works in question. Note also that even in these abbreviated extracts there are different things going on. They focus on specific details of the works in question: a description of a dinner party at the Veneerings house in *Our Mutual Friend*, a description of Iago standing firm at the end of *Othello*, and descriptions of the tone and impact of individual lines in the Serote poem. But the interpretations also make wider claims about the works as a whole: that *Our Mutual Friend* is “a work of de-mystification” with regard to the “false god”, money; that *Othello* “is about male attitudes towards women”; and that the Serote poem is about “an encounter with an apparition, emerging suddenly out of nowhere—the nowhere that people of ‘other’ races inhabit in a racist culture.” These are themes that the critics have identified or postulated as arising from the works, themes that they believe will help illuminate the works and add to our interest in them. Finally, apropos the context of this discussion, there are no references to authorial intentions, indeed no substantial references to the authors themselves. To ask whether Dickens intended that “The reader himself becomes the great looking-glass above the sideboard” or that Shakespeare intended that Iago “speaks the ordinary wisdom of the male world” seems somehow absurd and irrelevant. We judge these comments on quite different grounds.

3. *Meaning and the “Linguistic Fallacy”*

The problem with intention in this context is that it is closely tied to meaning. What we are really asking is about the intended meaning. But I am not convinced that our sample interpretations are primarily about meaning. And if they are not primarily about meaning then they cannot be primarily about intended meaning. This brings us back to my opening remarks about analytic philosophers and their contributions to this discussion. To my mind, they have been too fixated on meaning—word and sentence and conversational meaning—to notice the quite diverse things that go on when critics offer sustained readings of literary works.

Furthermore—to follow up a point made by Stein Haugom Olsen (1987)—they get off on the wrong foot by insisting on talking about what they call “the meaning of the work”. Over and over this phrase gets taken for granted. Yet I doubt these same philosophers would think of applying the phrase to philosophical works. No serious philosopher would suppose that the aim of reading Hume’s *Treatise* or Kant’s *Third Critique* is to uncover the meaning of these works. To ask, “what is the meaning of Hume’s *Treatise*?” or “what does Hume’s *Treatise* mean?” makes little sense. What we find in the *Treatise* is not a meaning as such but detailed claims about human thought and reasoning; we reflect on Hume’s methodology, the points he is making, his principal arguments, his relations with other philosophers: not on the meaning of the work.

Of course, at another level, we are inevitably concerned with meaning when we read philosophy, what particular words mean, what a sentence or a passage means, and our focus usually, if not exclusively, is what the author meant by these words or sentences. Intention, at this level, is paramount. Something similar is true with literary works: meanings of words and sentences do, of course, concern us. I shall come back to that. But, as we have seen, interpretation moves to a wider perspective—beyond sentence and word meaning—finding value in a work’s subject, taking for granted, or at least building on, the presentation of the subject at sentential level. And the mistake of the analytical philosophers is to suppose that literary interpretation discloses *the meaning of the work* in the very same way that semantic or Gricean analysis discloses the meaning of words and sentences.

Robert Stecker is an eloquent example of a philosopher who wants to give special priority to *the meaning of the work* in literary contexts. And he has a clear idea of what it is: “the meaning of a work” he unequivocally asserts, “is identical to its utterance meaning” (Stecker 2003: 59). Elsewhere he says: “I will use ‘utterance meaning’ and ‘work meaning’ interchangeably” (Stecker 2006: 430). He elaborates: “Utterance meaning specifies what someone has said or done by using language on a particular occasion” (Stecker 2003: 59). But in the context of whole literary works this is really not helpful. It is not problematic to think of writing as a mode of utterance, but to suppose that a whole work—say, a novel—possesses utterance meaning explained as “what someone has said or done by using language on a particular occasion” seems both reductive and uninformative. If there is a “particular occasion” for the utterance what matters is less some individual act of speech or writing, rather a wider literary, institutional, and historical context, which makes writing of that kind possible.

The problem here is that the wrong model of meaning is being appealed to: the model in effect of speech as the conveying of thoughts using single sentences or small clusters of sentences in well-defined communicative contexts. It simply does not fit literary works conceived

as works of art, read and appreciated within the norms of a distinct practice. A philosopher like Stecker might reply that a literary work is (and can be) no more than the set of sentences that constitute its text, and so the meaning of the work is simply the compound of the meanings—the semantic meanings—of the individual sentences. But even if we could grasp what this compound meaning is, it can at best explicate for us the *subject* of the work, without touching on the wider interests of the kind expressed in our sample passages, interests of a broader thematic nature that are the basis of interpretation.

Noël Carroll quite rightly identifies what he calls a “Linguistic Fallacy” here, that is, “the presumption that all art interpretation can be modelled on the interpretation of the linguistic meanings of a word or a sentence” (Carroll 2011: 121). He applies this directly to literary works:

Thematic interpretation of entire literary works and even parts thereof is radically different than the comprehension and interpretation of word meaning and sentence meaning. [...] Most literary interpretation, like most art interpretation in general, should not be modelled on the comprehension and interpretation of word and sentence meaning. (Carroll 2011: 124–125)

That is exactly the point I have been emphasising. And Carroll even goes on to suggest something similar to the main idea of this paper, that literary interpretation is not just about meaning.

This is not to say that literary interpretation may never come down to deciphering word meaning or sentence meaning, as in cases that call for disambiguating certain sentences and phrases. My argument [...] is merely that this is not the form literary interpretation always or perhaps even most generally takes. To suppose it to be so is a mistake—it is to commit the Linguistic Fallacy—which is a fallacy precisely because the objects of interpretation, even with respect to literature, typically go beyond word meaning and sentence meaning. (Carroll 2011: 126)

On the face of it this, encouragingly, sets Carroll apart from philosophers like Stecker, Jerrold Levinson (2016), Stephen Davies (2006), Sherri Irvin (2006), and others, who, as I see it, go wrong in resting their analyses of literary interpretation on the idea of the meaning of the work, drawing on Gricean or speech act theories of meaning to do so. However, Carroll gives with one hand only to take away with the other. In the same paper he returns to a more familiar theme of his: what he calls the “continuum between how we understand the words and deeds of others on a daily basis and the interpretation of art and literature” (Carroll 2011: 127). Stressing such a continuum, particularly in his appeal to a conversational or communicative model of literary works, loses what I proposed at the outset, namely, the uniqueness and sui generis nature of literary interpretation:

I think that interpretation is [...] best understood as an extension of our ordinary practices of mind reading. [...] If art interpretation is on a continuum with the interpretative activity that we engage in on a daily basis, then some form of actual intentionalism would seem to follow naturally, since

in the normal course of affairs the object of interpretation is to identify the intentions, beliefs, and desires of others. As we observe the speech, gesture, and behavior of others, we typically do so in order to, as we say, read their minds. (Carroll 2011: 127)

So after all, for Carroll, a speaker's intended meaning in a conversational context remains the paradigm for understanding what literary interpretation is (for further discussion of the conversational view, see Huddleston 2012; Jannotta 2014). Surely that is the Linguistic Fallacy again. And it does little justice to its topic.

4. *Subject and theme*

But we need to get down to finer detail. Recall the distinction between subject and theme that I mentioned earlier in passing. The subject of a literary work, put simply, is the story it tells, the plot, the characters, the events described, the twists and turns, the action, the emotion, the world presented. Many works of fiction encourage attention only to their subject: the pleasure lies in bringing to mind the plot and characters, the excitement, the immersion in a world, the flights of imagination. Works of literature, however, invite something more: they encourage reflection on the subject at a wider thematic level, as we have seen; readers seek ideas that arise out of the subject or cast light on it or can be seen as being explored within it, issues of moral choice, perhaps, or themes of loss or hope or ambition or despair, the sorts of concerns that we associate with the great novels or plays.

In a word we expect more than a story told, something wider, grander, something to exercise our minds. Literary interpretation is in the business of identifying and characterising this broader content. There are two quite different ways of answering the question what a work is about: the first concerns what is actually going on in the world described (subject-aboutness) the second, what ideas are raised and explored beyond the subject (thematic-aboutness). *Othello* is about an aggrieved adjutant bringing about the downfall of his commanding officer; it is also about jealousy, power, distrust, perhaps even "male attitudes towards women".

The relation between subject and theme is complex. Put in simple terms, we can say that the enquiry into a work's subject takes a different form from, even if it is not entirely distinct from, an enquiry into its themes. I take the latter to be the central focus of literary interpretation. What about the former, the enquiry into the subject of a work? There are two related, but distinct modes involved: let us call them, loosely following Monroe Beardsley, *textual explication* and the investigation of the *world of a work* (Beardsley 1981: 401). Explication is most directly concerned with meaning (what the words and sentences in the text mean), the other concerns what is true within the world of the work or what is true in the fiction (assuming the work is fiction).

Literary or thematic interpretation cannot proceed without being grounded in the work's subject, at both the level of textual meaning and the level of truth in fiction. After all, it involves reflections on the subject, and it draws its support from the presentation of the subject. In this sense of course meaning is crucially involved in interpretation: textual meaning helps to define the subject and interpretation reflects on the subject. But this necessary connection in no way weakens the claim that interpretation itself is not primarily in the business of meaning.

5. *Textual explication*

Let us look first at the textual explication of meaning. This is a crucial stage in critical practice, and it might be that the philosophers' toolkit from philosophy of language—the theories of meaning—can gain some purchase here, although I have doubts about Carroll's conversational paradigm. Here is a bit more from Attridge's comments on the Serote poem. I take it he is explicating the meaning of a word and a sentence.

'Baas', the universal South African word for 'master' or 'sir' (an Afrikaans word derived from an identical word in Dutch, itself the source of the American English word 'boss'), the word of deference, the word that claims to do homage to me (for I am immediately interpellated by this word as a white man living in South Africa) rings with a dangerous hollowness, coming as it does without pause after the demonstration of pre-emptive superiority. It is a word whose massive potential for satire I, as a white master, am not allowed, or not able, to perceive, yet it is hard to take it at face value when it is linked to an imperative. And yet there is nothing in the words to cancel their positive meaning, the offer of goodwill which they present. If that offer is genuinely there, I cannot afford to miss it, to lose it in the darkness of my fears. Too much is at stake. [...] The appellation 'Baas' can be quite affirmative, and how am I to know how much, if any, positive feeling it carries here? For all their immediacy, the words remain alien, resistant, irreducible; they have no depth, no underside, I can only read them again, go round the possibilities of tone, register the implications one more time. (Attridge 2004: 115–116)

Attridge tells us the literal meaning of the word "Baas" (its Afrikaans origins) but he is more concerned with much richer sources of meaning involving connotation and tone in precisely this context. He finds a "dangerous hollowness" in the opening words, something "alien, resistant, irreducible", potentially working against an otherwise "positive meaning".

In response, let me make a general observation, then three subsidiary comments. The general point is simply this: that if some theory is needed to explain what is going on in Attridge's analysis—and by extension in similar types of textual explication—it is not a philosophical theory of meaning we should turn to but a theory of poetic criticism and its protocols.

My first comment concerns intention. When Attridge asks "how am I to know how much, if any, positive feeling it [the word "Baas"] carries here?" his question is rhetorical; he is not seeking a determinate

answer, certainly not making an implicit appeal to authorial intention. Asking what the poet intended is only marginally relevant here. Attridge's point is surely that not knowing how much positive feeling to find in the lines is precisely part of their power and their alienness. The assumption that Attridge is making—rightly so—is that Serote is a subtle and sophisticated poet. So, the presence of tension and edginess in his lines does not need to be endorsed by trying to establish what the poet intended. His intention was to write just those words embodied in a poem. A good reader recognizes what such words in such a context mean and connote: and I refer not just to the context of apartheid in South Africa, the fears and anxieties on both sides of the racial divide, and so on, but also to the context of how language works in poetry. As so often with literary meaning we do not start with the intention and infer the meaning, we start with the meaning and, if we can be bothered, go on to infer the intention.

My second comment is this. The fact that Attridge finds in the lines nuanced and diverse connotations draws on a deep tradition of poetry and the reading of poetry. Layers of meaning, ambiguity, rich tonal suggestiveness, tensions and resistance, are simply what one expects from lyric poetry (the New Critics highlighted the fact, but the point does not depend on any theoretical dogma). This should be the starting point in reading poetry, not claims about utterer's meaning, or conversational implicature or pragmatic inferences. The importation of some such philosophical or linguistic framework of meaning does not add anything to understanding the mechanisms at work that are not recognised already as integral to the practice of poetry. I suggest that something similar is true in the analysis of narrative fiction. The practice of reading fiction is built on a host of presuppositions, norms, expectations, and standard protocols of interpretation and evaluation, which themselves are likely to have more explanatory force than that offered by theories imported from philosophy of language. I will turn in a moment to examples from narrative.

My third comment brings us back to the relation of subject to theme, more specifically textual meaning and interpretation. The unpacking of the connotations in Attridge's analysis is closely bound up with the higher-order reflections that he offers in his wider interpretation. Here we find a suggestion of the hermeneutic circle. What connotations the words are seen to bear depend crucially on the overall conception of the achievement and power of the poem itself. Yet the wider interpretation draws on and is grounded in the connotations recognised in the individual words and phrases. What looks like a broad thematic statement for Attridge—"I have been seen, and seen through, while I remain in the dark"—is supported by the observation that, at a verbal level, "For all their immediacy, the words remain alien, resistant, irreducible." The reader remains in the dark through this encounter because he does not know how much positive connotation to give to phrases like "Do

not fear Baas.” Were the poem to be read in an unequivocally positive manner—as a constructive reaching out—then those connotations of alienness and irreducibility would be lost or diminished. What better indication of the power and the ineliminability of the hermeneutic circle in this case than Attridge’s conclusion: “I can only read them again, go round the possibilities of tone, register the implications one more time.” The idea that we should consult the author to get us off this hook is just an abdication of responsibility on the part of the reader. The tension and ambiguity that Attridge finds cannot be magicked away by a simplistic appeal to authority. Serote’s perfectly reasonable response would be: read the poem again.

6. *Truth in fiction*

Beyond *textual explication* of meaning, the second aspect of identifying a work’s subject is determining what is true in the world of the work. This is the focus of Kathleen Stock’s book *Only Imagine* (2017). Stock takes what she calls an “extreme intentionalist” stance on this, such that, in summary, “the fictional content of a particular text is equivalent to exactly what the author of the text *intended the reader to imagine*” (Stock 2017: 1, italics in original). I take it that this is not the same as adopting an intentionalist stance on *meaning* in fictional texts; in fact, the claim is not really about meaning at all. Stock does talk about the interpretation of fictional content, but this is not interpretation as I have been describing it or which fits the examples earlier. Nothing I want to say about literary interpretation is incompatible with her intentionalism about fictional content (that is, what is true in fiction).

But I do have one or two remarks to make in the context of talking about the relation between subject and theme and between the meaning of individual words and sentences in a work and thematic interpretation of that work. In fact, Stock does make explicit comparisons between the identification of fictional content and the kinds of interpretation that interest me.

One example she cites is Terry Eagleton’s Marxist reading of *Wuthering Heights* where Eagleton says that Heathcliff “represents a turbulent form of capitalist aggression which must historically be civilised.” Stock writes:

However, on closer inspection, this is not best understood as a claim about fictional content, but rather about structural similarities between the character Heathcliff and a capitalist archetype. It seems compatible with this reading that Brontë intentionally represented Heathcliff as having characteristics x, y, and z. This in turn has allowed Eagleton later to recognize that Heathcliff, qua possessor of characteristics x, y, and z, embodies several features of capitalist aggression as he conceives it, and to that extent ‘represents’ such aggression. In the same way we might say that actual people in the world ‘represent’ certain forces or ideas, even where they are unaware of them. (Stock 2017: 102)

Another example she gives is the Freudian claim that Hamlet suffers from an Oedipus complex. Yet how could Shakespeare have intended this content? Again, Stock insists that the fictional content itself is just a set of characteristics intentionally ascribed to Hamlet by Shakespeare, which only later get redescribed in Freudian theory as symptomatic of an Oedipus complex.

In many ways the point she is making is telling. Importantly, it shows how interpretations even of a Marxist or Freudian kind must, to have any credibility, be grounded in, and supported by, facts about the subject: in these cases, textually identifiable characteristics attributed to Heathcliff and Hamlet. This looks like a proper constraint on any defensible interpretation. But it does raise some questions. One concerns the limits imposed on fictional content. For Stock neither Heathcliff's manifesting capitalist aggression nor Hamlet manifesting an Oedipus complex is part of the respective content of the two fictions. In both cases, she believes, the matters are indeterminate: "It is simply fictionally *indeterminate* whether Hamlet has an Oedipus complex or not" (Stock 2017: 103, italics in original). And the reason for the indeterminacy is that "no intentions specify the matter either way" although she adds that "audiences may often harmlessly imagine something specific about the matter, going beyond the fictional content of the text" (2017: 103).

It is right that literary interpretations of the kind exemplified at the beginning do go beyond the fictional content. That is the whole point—they go beyond, in the sense that they reflect on, the subject of the work. But it would be strange to think of this as a kind of harmless or idle imagining. It is a search for something profound or interesting that arises out of the subject or gives its elements some overarching unity or connectedness. Fictional content of the kind that Stock explores concerns fictional worlds; interpretation of the kind that interests me concerns the representation of fictional worlds. The focus for interpretation is less on *what* is represented in a fiction as on *how* it is represented.

I will expand on that in a moment but first a final word about fictional content itself as Stock envisages it. How constraining is authorial intention here? Her headline account, remember, is that fictional content is "equivalent to exactly what the author of the text *intended the reader to imagine*." So, what about those "characteristics x, y, and z" of Heathcliff that are intended by Emily Brontë but cannot include capitalist aggression? If the intention constraint is strong then we might need to think not just of characteristics but of *predicates* that are permissible in our redescription of Heathcliff. It seems as if for an "extreme intentionalist", these predicates must be licenced, as it were, by Brontë herself; in other words, they must either be drawn explicitly from the novel or be at least readily accessible to Brontë given her personal nature, knowledge, and historical context. This seriously constrains our thoughts about the content of the novel and adds signifi-

cantly to the range of fictional indeterminacy. It is one thing to deem as inadmissible, terminology associated with Marxist theory, but we forget how much of our own thinking is imbued with presuppositions, linguistic and psychological, alien to a vicar's daughter in Yorkshire in the 1840s. On Stock's account, this places what might seem unacceptably high barriers to a modern reader's legitimate access to the content of such a famous novel.

In fact, Stock pulls back from too austere an authorial constraint on fictional content when she writes: "a reader can defeasibly bring to bear her knowledge of factors such as conventional sentence meaning, conversational implicatures, fictional genres, stereotypes, stock characters, and culturally popular symbolic associations [...] in order to work out reasonable hypotheses about what the author intended her to imagine" (Stock 2017: 81). But once all of that is in play one wonders how constraining authorial intentions actually are in practice.

Also, the hermeneutic circle rears its head again, increasing the amount of fictional indeterminacy. In many cases the attribution of properties to a character is likely to be influenced by an overall conception of the work; and the overall conception, in an interpretation, will draw its support from how the character is depicted. Examples from dramatic performance reinforce the point. Quite apart from Marxism or Freudianism, think how differently characters like Ophelia, or Julius Caesar, or Richard the Third, or Shylock are portrayed on stage. Is Ophelia timid or rebellious, melancholic or just scared? (Lamarque 2002: 296) Many seemingly basic facts about the content Shakespeare intended can easily get overwhelmed by competing visions in performance. Yet how much fictional indeterminacy can be allowed before we lose our grip altogether on the subject of a work?

7. *Conclusions*

I have said that exploring the subject of a work, either through textual explication or the recovery of fictional content, concerns *what* is represented in a fiction, while interpretation characteristically focuses on *how* it is represented. Another way of thinking of the distinction is in terms of internal and external perspectives on a fictional world (Lamarque 2014). From an internal perspective on a fictional world—at least a realistically depicted fictional world—characters are real people, acting, thinking, talking, living, and dying; from an external perspective the characters are merely artefacts of an author, creations in language, they are symbols, representations, rounded or stock characters, comic, heroic, tragic, typical or otherwise of a genre. Interpretations, while drawing on what facts there are from the internal perspective, will tend to adopt the external perspective, looking at modes of representation themselves.

Characteristically, an interpretation will provide a web of concepts to connect, to enhance, to contextualise or generalise the subject-con-

tent of a work. It provides a perspective on that content which shows something interesting or unanticipated about the content. Hillis Miller finds in the descriptions of the Veneerings' dinner parties "language that is cold and withdrawn, terse"; he describes an ironic and "mirror-like detachment" in the narrative point of view throughout *Our Mutual Friend*; he speaks of the "emptiness" of the characters and their "bewitch(ment) by a false god" of money. Marilyn French sees in *Othello* "a profound examination of male modes of thought and behaviour", epitomised by Iago who "speaks the ordinary wisdom of the male world" and who having brought chaos to the world nevertheless stands "triumphant" at the end. Derek Attridge finds a tone of "alarm" and something "alien, resistant, irreducible" in the Serote poem, an uncomfortable tension in its mood, which both attracts and disturbs. To repeat our main motif again, none of this seems especially amenable to analytical accounts of meaning.

Understanding is not the same as interpreting, although the latter might presuppose the former. It is possible to understand a narrative and take pleasure from it without adopting any higher-order perspective offered by interpretation. Such a reader merely grasps the work's subject or attempts to do so. Of course, there is no guarantee that an interpretation, however ingenious, will in fact serve to increase an appreciative experience in a reader. For example, a criticism of French's analysis of *Othello* might be that it rests on too stark or stereotypical a conception of what she calls the "feminine" and "masculine" principles: the latter rooted in "control, reason, power, possession" (French 1992: 233), the former in "loyalty, obedience and emotion" (French 1992: 232). But, to counter the objection, the quoted passage shows she finds such principles in characters of both sexes and her accounts of how the principles are manifested, as well as abused and derided, are for the most part illuminating in her Shakespeare readings, offering insights into the scenes and characters she discusses.

In response to the question "what is the point of interpretation?" the standard answer has been that interpretation helps us understand the meaning of a work. A good interpretation is one, presumably, that makes the meaning as clear as possible. That picture is one I have questioned, indeed rejected. It is hard to see what value there might be simply in aiming to recover a work's meaning as if it were a puzzle to be solved. Nor am I persuaded that seeing literary works as kinds of communication—resting on meaning paradigms drawn from communicative speech—is particularly apt or helpful. Instead, I have proposed that we think of interpretation not in terms of understanding, not even in terms of meaning, but in terms of providing a perspective through which the particulars of the work, its subject, can be reflected on in at least partial explanation of why the work might afford continuing interest: in a word where its literary values might lie. If we seek criteria for assessing an interpretation we must ask two questions, both essential: Is it supported by the work itself? Does it serve to enrich our

experience of the work? Any reference to authorial intention or sentential meaning must find its place much earlier in the process.²

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² Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Workshop on Meaning in Literary/Legal Texts, Senate House, University of London, London, 2018, and the Workshop on Fiction and Modality, University of Graz, Graz, 2019. Ideas in the paper draw on, and further develop, previous work of mine on interpretation, notably Lamarque (2002), (2009), and (2019).