

ESSAY THREE

Literary Knowledge¹

“The pragmatic role of an utterance or text is not something that can be read out in a purely semantic analysis . . .”²

P. LIVINGSTON (1988)

Neoclassical interpretation was not, as today, an articulation of “the complex patterns of [literary] works of art,” but the description of “what authors expected readers to know or infer about particular elements of poems.” Neoclassical interpretation was no more than a species of ordinary attempts to understand properly “a complex mixture of moral implications, genre, and the inferences we make about characters (or personae).” And literary works of art themselves were taken to be no more nor less than “all surface and implications . . . that never, as far as meaning is concerned, get beyond fictive implication.”³

R. SEAMON (1995)

In this short essay I would like to isolate for closer inspection two distinct avenues of inquiry into literary knowledge and the practices of interpretation in the literary arts.

1. Two Ideas

A first way of inquiry into literary knowledge concerns the possibility of a reintegration of the study of literary works within

a realist socio-historical framework of analysis. Although it is hardly new to condemn the centrality of aesthetics in the literary fields and to call for historical or even materialist work, the proposal here differs from some manifestations of these tendencies.

Many thoughtful persons seek some guidelines for telling whether a critic has really gotten beyond an exclusively aesthetic point of view. To do so involves a much more basic shift than many critics realize. Without such a basic shift, many putatively sociological approaches to literature are still vitiated by aspects of a rather different orientation.

The second idea about inquiry into literary knowledge concerns a more properly epistemological and cognitive role for literature and its analysis. This idea calls for a reintegration of literary work within the ongoing project of hypothesis formation within the human and social sciences.⁴ These two ideas are on view both at the beginning and at the end of the distinguished Canadian critic Paisley Livingston's important, thoughtful, and well-argued book *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science*.⁵ In his book Livingston advocates both types of still largely neglected avenues of inquiry for literary research.

These ideas of course open onto complex discussions, and, in all fairness, we need to be careful in such discussions about ascribing to Livingston views he in fact does not hold. With this caution in mind, I think that we might not unfairly summarize the first avenue of inquiry in the watchword "pragmatics over semantics." Hereafter, I will call this orientation the pragmatics recommendation. And the second orientation might be summarized, again rather roughly, in the phrase, "knowledge *in* literature versus knowledge *of* literature." I will call this orientation the cognitivity recommendation.⁶

In what follows I would like to recall the main contexts of each of these two recommendations with an aim not to criticize them,

for this would be premature, but to formulate a question about each. With two specific questions before us, I would then like to conclude with a third, more general question about just one of the central issues that underlies both the pragmatics and the cognitivity recommendations.

2. A Recommendation

In an extended thought experiment towards the end of his book, Livingston provides a detailed description of what he has in mind when advocating the pragmatics recommendation. Asking us to imagine an actual exchange of letters between two correspondents in which one of the letter writers raises a delicate matter with a touch of irony, Livingston details his description at length in such a way as to model some of the central relations between a literary-critical orientation and its domain. The point of the experiment is to demonstrate that an exclusive focus on the meaning of the text, the letter, effectively excludes the historical and social contexts in which meaning is embedded, and with these contexts, the crucial irony in question.

Livingston goes on to show how an initial indeterminate question, “what does a particular text mean?” gives way to a subsequent determinate one, “what are the consequences of an utterance in the context of the interpretation in which it occurs?” and its more general complement, “what systems of interaction are the proximate conditions of the emergence of the utterance?” (248-55).

Throughout, the foil here is an approach to cultural artefacts that would isolate them as autonomous domains. By contrast, Livingston argues the necessity of situating these artefacts in the larger domains of systematic interactions. And specifically with regard to the meaning of an utterance in a literary work, he holds

that “an utterance’s effective role in the history of an interaction is a special case defined in terms of specific agents, interactions, and contexts” (252). The moral of his story is “that the pragmatic role of an utterance or text is not something that can be read out in a purely semantic analysis. . . .” (258).

Now when we reflect on these suggestive remarks about pragmatics over semantics, and consider them in the context of Livingston’s analysis of such concrete examples as Molière’s *Le Tartuffe*, a question arises. We might try to focus this question in terms of Livingston’s own revealing comment: “In Molière’s context,” Livingston writes, “Tartuffe’ was not a name that referred literally to a single person, but this fact hardly settles the question of the play’s reference, which involves abstract and typical situations, individuals and events” (257, author’s emphasis).

This comment may suggest a variety of questions, whether about meaning, reference, significance, truth, particulars, universals, and so on. One question here arises from the opposition in this passage between the reference of the proper name of a fictional character and the reference of the play in which the character appears. In short, it is a question about the scope of the term “semantics” in our watchword, “pragmatics over semantics.”

Answering such a question in turn will demarcate the scope of the paired term, “pragmatics.” And with the extension of the key terms clarified, we might then move on to test this recommendation. So, when recommending pragmatics over semantics, how precisely does Livingston delimit the scope of the term, “semantics”? Here then is a first question.

3. Cognitivity

Besides the importance of pragmatics over semantics, Livingston also urges renewed attention to the priority of knowledge *in liter-*

ature over knowledge *of* literature (2). The point here is to underline “the epistemological value of readings of literary texts” against the background of the defence of knowledge against various forms of scepticism provided in earlier parts of the book. Once again the foil is the now familiar one of a purely aesthetic orientation to literary works of art that uncompromisingly excludes from any consideration at all the putative truth of the work.

Livingston works very carefully here and takes pains to rule out any facile misunderstandings of his proposal. His major goal is to tie the epistemological value of reading literary works of art to refining, complexifying, and challenging viable hypotheses outside literature. “What I have in mind,” he writes, “. . . involves an investigation of the ways oriented readings of literary works serve to challenge and to refine, to complexify and to perfect hypotheses within other anthropological disciplines” (260). Or, as he puts the matter in slightly different terms, “the role of textual analysis is in this context heuristic, epistemological and cognitive” (250).

Making excellent use of examples, Livingston particularizes his general recommendation. He then summarizes and concludes his discussion of literary knowledge with a hypothesis of his own: “My hypothesis . . . is that literary texts can be very usefully mobilized in relation to the models and assumptions at work in a range of anthropological research programs, particularly in regard to social psychology, sociological and philosophical theories of action, all of the topics of sociological theory, political philosophy, law, individual psychology, and ethics” (262-3).

Now once again when we consider carefully these remarks together with related comments throughout the book about the nature of knowledge in literature, further questions arise. Perhaps we might try to focus at least one of these questions, taking our bearings as before with the help of an example.

Livingston writes: “a reading of Emile Zola’s *Pot-Bouille* in relation to a body of social hypotheses could seek to discover the ways that text’s implicit model of the matrimonial economy (and its relation to realities economic in the strict sense) amounts to a valuable commentary on the same issues. This commentary that could in fact to a complexification of the hypotheses and theoretical assumptions necessary to any real inquiry” (262). Livingston goes on to add that the emphasis here should fall in “what valuable beliefs made [*sic*: “might”?] be reconstructed through readings of his (and other) writings” (262).

This comment, like the earlier one, raises questions about, among other matters, authors’ intentions, the social contexts of literary works, mimesis, representation, and so on. One question I would like to emphasize here has to do with the nature of knowledge in literature. How would Livingston have us understand the relationships between putative knowledge arising from oriented readings of literary works and knowledge arising from confirmation and disconfirmation of hypotheses in the social sciences? Are these, in all cases, knowledge in exactly the same sense? If so, exactly why; if not, then what consequences follow for the well-foundedness of the working distinction between knowledge in and knowledge of literature? In short, is some knowledge in literature of a substantially different kind than knowledge arrived at in the social sciences?

4. Comparative Literary Epistemology

With these two issues before us – pragmatics over semantics and knowledge in literature versus knowledge of literature – I would like to raise a third question about the overarching project of putting into place a “comparative literary epistemology.”⁷

Very early in his book, Livingston makes use of this crucial description in a careful way. Thus, in his opening chapter on literary

theory, he qualifies the key phrase here as an epistemology “that looks at criticism’s relationship to other models of knowledge . . .” (17). In this sense theory “should be concerned primarily with assessing the nature and status of literary knowledge - and should do this particularly in relation to the models of knowledge presented by other fields of research” (18). The idea is that theory in a modest, qualified, and circumspect way should be understood as an essential instrument in clarifying “the topics and lines of inquiry available to critical research . . .” (18)

These brief descriptions are just a few of the many related discussions throughout the work that call attention, in Livingston’s view, to a particular pre-eminence for comparative epistemological inquiry in our need both to situate literary works of art in larger than merely semantic contexts and to articulate in strong versions the appropriate forms of literary knowledge. Part of the concern here is to direct current attention away from some of the concerns with the ontology of literature, the nature and kinds of objects at issue in, say, describing and trying to define literary works of art, in the interest of reemphasizing the nature of our inquiry into such works (cf. 214).

Yet, despite the forceful reflection on several of the issues that cluster around the obscure phrase, “literary objects,” Livingston recognizes that theory includes a double concern and not just a single one. Thus, at the very beginning of his book he writes: theory “is about criticism and what critics should and should not try to do with the primary works. By the same stroke, theory is necessarily about these works as well, and what they can and cannot be expected to offer us” (2). And later, in the first chapter, while developing an argument against the satisfactoriness of merely formal understandings of “theory,” Livingston remarks on how “we have not yet established anything about what constitutes the domain of literary

facts to be modelled by the sentences or strings of our literary system” (15). Such comments I think may raise an important issue here, a question with which I would like to conclude.

5. Another Approach

In these connections several of the many interesting issues another distinguished contemporary Canadian critic Roger Seamon has described merit closer attention.⁸ Seamon believes that characteristic contemporary approaches to the understanding of literary works contrast strongly with representative approaches to such understanding in the seminal period of modern aesthetics, the eighteenth century.

Today, after an era of deconstruction and so much more, understanding literary works is caught up in a frenzy of interpretation, a state of violent mental agitation in the increasing and largely academic attempts to produce statements “about the meaning of a whole work” (1). By contrast, in the neoclassical period understanding literary works, while indeed concerned with meaning, had virtually nothing to do with interpretation.

A first issue arises here. If we parse the term “interpretation” in current critical parlance, say with a careful eye on both diverse critical uses today and on the usages cited for example in the two-volume *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, then the fact that between 1660 and the 1790’s literary critics used the term “interpretation” differently than critics do today seems unsurprising. Indeed, this fact seems uninteresting. If on the other hand we examine the entries under “interpretation” in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* and especially the now almost-forgotten contexts of his abundant citations, then the claim that neoclassical understandings of the literary work have virtually nothing to do with interpretation seems false, and again

uninteresting. So, in the contrast between neoclassical and contemporary uses of the term “interpretation,” exactly what is interesting?

Seamon himself thinks this contrast raises at least three questions: can we describe such a contrast more sharply, can we recover “the conceptual foundations” of neoclassical criticism (1), and can this theoretical basis suggest useful correctives to current practice? Seamon discusses mainly the first question, while adverting only occasionally to his other two. And, instructively, he discusses mainly the neoclassical view of interpretation rather than our contemporary one.

Close inspection of much current critical theorizing, Seamon believes, suggests that contemporary views of literary understanding, however complex, follow from construing the literary work of art as pre-eminently a system of signs requiring deep interpretation. Accordingly, understanding the literary work of art requires expert training to look beneath the manifest meaning of the work and, by deploying various technical methods, to articulate an interpretation of the latent and hidden meaning of the work’s signs. Since this articulation must reduce the manifest sense and significance of the work to the latent ones by moving from “surface clues to some hidden meaning” (10), contemporary critical theorizing is open to the charge of being finally a reductive approach to the nature of literary understanding.

Here however a second issue arises in the guise of several different questions that need distinguishing. One question concerns whether understanding literary works of art requires more than ordinary means of comprehension. A different question concerns whether understanding the meaning of a literary work of art requires distinguishing between surface and deep meanings (whatever they might be). And still a further question concerns whether we need to distinguish between the proper objects of literary understanding and those

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of interpretation. Perhaps we might conflate these questions for now as a second issue for further inquiry: what, if anything, can an interpretation of a literary work of art add to the comprehension of such a work?

Returning to Seamon's work, we may note that similar close inspection, now not of contemporary critical practices but of some writings of the previous generation of literary scholars, purportedly shows that these writings were "based. . . on what they [these critics] thought were the neoclassical principles" (6). These writings suggest that neoclassical views about literary understanding were quite different.

Although these scholars were often at work on "the exegesis of short passages" and "the untangling of plots" (6), the basis of their practices can properly be taken as following from the neoclassical construal (perhaps implicit?) of literary works of art as pre-eminently not sign systems but performances. Accordingly, neoclassical understandings of literary works of art required no one more technically expert than the common reader. This reader's judgments and inferences were based on the manifest aspects of the work and on implications about the utterances of its fictional characters (as opposed to those of actual persons). Consequently, such understandings were not reductive. These ordinary judgments and inferences needed no further qualifications than those that follow from authors' generic purposes about the details and kinds of performances intended.

A third issue emerges here. Why should we scrutinize the critical practices of some of the last generation's contributions to such flagship professional journals as *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Society*] on the unargued assumption that their critical practices rested on a firm enough grasp of neoclassical principles of literary understanding to warrant valid inferences to those prin-

ciples? Instead, why not more simply scrutinize the critical practices of Dryden and especially Johnson themselves? And if that turns out to be rehearsing an old story, why not look freshly at reliable critical reconstructions of these neoclassical canons in the well-known essays of such outstanding modernist critics as T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, William Wimsatt, or Cleanth Brooks? Another discussion question then might go: if the evidence Seamon offers here for justifying his descriptions of neoclassical understandings of interpretation and meaning might not be satisfactory enough, then just what evidence for such descriptions would be satisfactory?

Seamon concludes that neoclassical interpretation was not, as today, an articulation of “the complex patterns of [literary] works of art,” but the description of “what authors expected readers to know or infer about particular elements of poems” (7). Neoclassical interpretation was no more than a species of ordinary attempts to understand properly “a complex mixture of moral implications, genre, and the inferences we make about characters (or *personae*)” (11). And literary works of art themselves were taken to be no more nor less than “all surface and implications . . . that never, as far as meaning is concerned, get beyond fictive implication” (12).

To summarize then three issues that call for clarification and discussion: (1) What are the appropriate evidential bases for articulating the central neoclassical views about the nature of literary understanding? (2) How are the elements, conditions, and uses of literary understanding to be fruitfully distinguished from those of literary interpretation? And (3) exactly what is the cardinal philosophical interest of distinguishing today between neoclassical and contemporary views about interpretation? In short, Seamon has come to believe that neoclassical interpretation was no more than the description of “what authors expected [ordinary, common] readers to know or infer about particular elements of poems.” But what

exactly might recommend such a not unproblematic view for our reflection on both literary understanding and interpretation today?

Envoi: Epistemology or Metaphysics?

In several places throughout their work, Livingston and Seamon show an admirable awareness of not just the details of contemporary philosophical reflection on the problems of epistemology but, as in Livingston's important discussion of moderate realism, of metaphysical issues as well. However, as is their right, both choose to orient their work here largely in epistemological terms. They draw on those terms both to specify his understanding of literary theory and to describe the general project as a "comparative literary epistemology."⁹

At least one further question now arises. In Livingston's characterization of both a pragmatic rather than a semantic orientation to literary study and an emphasis on knowledge in literature over knowledge of literature, how exactly does Livingston understand the metaphysical consequences of his repeated insistence on the pre-eminence and the priorities of epistemological inquiry?¹⁰ In a word, and quite generally, what are the metaphysical entailments of both Livingston's and Seamon's constructive emphases on pragmatic knowledge in literature?

Endnotes for Essay Three

- ¹ This essay is a previously unpublished revised version of an invited paper first presented at the Canadian Society for Aesthetics annual meeting in Victoria, British Columbia in May 1990 in a special critical book section devoted to Paisley Livingston's *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), and of a later related invited comment on an unpublished paper by Roger Seamon, "Before and After Interpretation: Neoclassical Criticism and Its Implications for Current Practice," presented at the American Society for Aesthetics, April 12-14, 1995 at Asilomar in Pacific Grove, California.
- ² P. Livingston, *Literary Knowledge*, p. 258. Further references incorporated in the essay above are to this book.
- ³ R. Seamon, Unpublished Manuscript, pp. 7, 11, and 12; cf. his "The Story of the Moral: Thematizing in Literary Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989), 229-236.
- ⁴ Cf. P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2009), pp. 219-254.
- ⁵ *Literary Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
- ⁶ On epistemological concerns here generally see J. O. Young, *Art and Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- ⁷ For a perspicuous and at the time unsigned editorial on some of the most basic issues here see G. Steiner, "Only Compare" first published in the *TLS* (*Times Literary Supplement*) on 12 March 1964 and reprinted in the *TLS* on 14 February 2020.
- ⁸ Seamon, Unpublished Manuscript. Further references incorporated in the essay above refer to this work .
- ⁹ Cf. the strong methodical concerns in W. Cohen's work in comparative and world literature, *A History of European Literature: The West and the World from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 2017).
- ¹⁰ See B. Hutchinson's awareness of this dimension in his recent book *Comparative Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2018).