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Reasoning to What Is True in Fiction

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the principles by which we reason to what is 'true in fiction'. The focus is David Lewis's article 'Truth in Fiction' (1978) which proposes an analysis in terms of counterfactuals and possible worlds. It is argued that Lewis's account is inadequate in detail and also in principle in that it conflicts radically with basic and familiar tenets of literary criticism. Literary critical reasoning about fiction concerns not the discovery of facts in possible worlds but the recovery of meanings in interpretative frameworks. The model theoretic approach fails to account for common literary or rhetorical devices like unreliable narration, connotation and point of view. And in explaining indeterminacy of content in terms of truth-value gaps it gives too simplistic an account of critical reasoning about character motivation and thematic development. A more adequate account of content-indeterminacy can be provided through a comparison of the interpretation of fiction with the interpretation of human action. A broader motif in the paper is the underlying tension between what is required for the logic of fiction and what is required for the aesthetics of fiction.

KEYS WORDS: Fiction, truth, reasoning, literary criticism, interpretation, aesthetics, David Lewis.

1

It is not always easy to reconcile the requirements of a logic of fiction with the requirements of an aesthetics of fiction. What a logician has to say about fiction *per se* is often remote from what a literary critic has to say about particular works of fiction. A logician, for example, will enquire about the reference of names in a fictional context or the truth-value of fictional propositions or the ontology of fictional objects. This logical enquiry is indifferent to literary or aesthetic value. A critic, on the other hand, will enquire about the meaning and value of particular works, or their themes and characterizations, or their truth from the point of view of perceptiveness or verisimilitude.

It might be argued that the difference is simply one of *level* or of *generality*, such that the relation between logic and aesthetics (or literary criticism) is something like the relation between philosophy of science and science itself. But this cannot be right. The difference is more complex and more interesting, for in certain respects the enquiries are incommen-

surable. When a logician, for example, speaks of a fictional object simply as the referent of a fictional name there is virtually no common ground with a critic who speaks of a fictional character as performing a certain function in a literary narrative. Or when a logician, in the context of semantic theory, assesses the truth conditions of fictive sentences and a critic, in the context of literary interpretation, assesses the thematic contribution of fictive descriptions, the judgements barely share even a common subject-matter.

In this paper I am going to explore one instance of this tension between logic and literary criticism: the idea of *reasoning to what is true in fiction*. Ostensibly here is a topic in which logicians and literary critics have a common interest. Both can agree on one sense of 'true in fiction' where it means simply *truth about a fictional world*. This sense will be the focus of the paper. Every reader of fiction is concerned with what happens in a fictional narrative, what the 'facts' are, as it were, about the fictional world. Of course we must not assume that this concern will always be uppermost. Whether it is will depend to a large extent on the type of fiction. The assumption that all fictional narrative depicts a coherent, ordered, 'realistic' world is not acceptable to the literary critic even though it often seems to underlie discussions of the logic of fiction. Some modern theories of narrative even encourage the working assumption that narrative is *not* descriptive of a 'world' except in particular, clearly defined, genres. Nevertheless, we should not be deflected from the obvious truth that all narratives to some degree invite readers to form beliefs about their content. Questions about the principles governing this grasp of content exercise both logicians and critics. These principles we can think of as relating to *reasoning to what is true in fiction*.

II

The issues that arise in identifying such principles can be clearly seen by considering the analysis of 'truth in fiction' that David Lewis (1978) offers, in terms of possible worlds. I will focus my discussion on Lewis's account.

Lewis takes us through a progression of three analyses which are increasingly sensitive to constraints arising from literary criticism. They are as follows:

ANALYSIS 0: A sentence of the form "In fiction f , ϕ " is true iff ϕ is true at every world where f is told as known fact rather than fiction. (p. 41)

ANALYSIS 1: A sentence of the form "In the fiction f , ϕ " is non-vacuously true iff some world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is not true. It is vacuously true iff there are no possible worlds where f is told as known fact. (p. 42)

ANALYSIS 2: A sentence of the form "In the fiction f , ϕ " is non-vacuously true iff,

whenever w is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f , then some world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is true differs less from the world w , on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is not true. It is vacuously true if there are no possible worlds where f is told as known fact. (p. 45)

Analysis 0 rules out any reasoning to what is true in a work of fiction beyond what is explicitly given in the content of the sentences in the work. Lewis is right to reject this analysis as too restricted. Both literary critics and ordinary readers take it for granted that inferences beyond what is explicit are not just permissible but indispensable in understanding fiction.

Analyses 1 and 2 are offered as genuine alternatives, though the latter, Lewis thinks, conforms better to critical sensibilities. What they have in common is the idea that truth in fiction is a product of two sources: the explicit content of sentences in the relevant text and a background against which we reason *beyond* that content. In Analysis 1 this background consists of facts about the actual world. In Analysis 2 it consists of beliefs overt in the community of origin of the fiction. Analysis 2 is offered as a way of eliminating the use of esoteric facts about the actual world (unknown perhaps to the author and readers of the text) to reason to what is true in the fiction.

Lewis's counterfactual basis for explaining our reasoning about fiction is in many ways highly attractive. It is easy to think of fictional narratives as describing what *would be the case if . . .* They speak, for the most part, of the *possible*, not the actual. They describe worlds, often similar, but not identical to, our own world. We can reason about what we are to take as true in a fiction, beyond its explicit content, because we read fiction against a presupposed background. All this is nicely captured by Lewis's account.

Yet I think there is a fundamental flaw in the account (in any version), which makes it unacceptable as a contribution to the aesthetics of fiction (and also to literary criticism). The flaw is that it excludes entirely the *intentionality* of fictional content and the *interpretative* nature of our reasoning about that content. It fails as an account of *literary* reasoning. By referring only to what is *true at such-and-such a world*, Lewis introduces a realist assumption into the reasoning, that is an assumption that there are 'facts' about the fictional worlds waiting to be discovered, and thus a certain kind of determinacy, which is not warranted in literary criticism. Ultimately, the critic is not so much exploring *facts* as uncovering *meanings*; he is not chronicling a *world* so much as constructing an *interpretation*. Nowhere is the critic more at odds with the logician. Let me pursue these objections.

III

Lewis explains our reasoning to what is true in fiction in terms of a

balance between the world (or worlds) explicitly presented in the text of a fiction and some background world. I will look in more detail at what he says about both components. His characterization of both, I suggest, is unacceptable to the demands of the literary critic.

Let us begin with his basic conception of the world(s) of a fiction. Lewis argues that the worlds explicitly presented are those worlds where the fictional story is 'told as known fact'. This eliminates the actual world because in the actual world the story is told *as fiction*. So even if, by massive coincidence, all the events and characters depicted in a fiction turn out to have exact counterparts in the real world, still the fictional world would not be identical with the real world as the acts of storytelling in the two worlds would be different. Lewis's condition, quite rightly, gives precedence in determining fictionality to what a storyteller *intends* rather than to *how things are in the world*. In other words it is not literal truth or falsity that makes a narrative factual or fictional but only the mode under which the narrative is presented, how it is told.¹

However, there are problems with the requirement that in the fictional world the story is 'told as known fact'. First, by covertly introducing the notion of truth, via that of knowledge, it threatens the account with circularity. The worlds that we are invited to consider when assessing what is true in a particular fiction are those worlds which contain only what is known to be true by the storyteller. Therefore to discover what the storyteller knows to be true we need to know what is true ourselves. Second, this becomes a difficulty in precisely those stories where the storyteller is depicted as unreliable or where narrative strategies, shifting points of view, a preponderance of dialogue, etc. occur. Lewis's account requires that the narrator tells the truth in a pretty straightforward way, recounting only what he knows and doing most of the talking himself. But this is an unwarranted assumption, at least as far as literary criticism is concerned. For one thing the device of the unreliable narrator is common enough in fiction: in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, the narrator conceals the fact till the very end that he himself is the murderer, and in three of Iris Murdoch's first-person novels, *Under the Net*, *The Black Prince*, and *The Sea, The Sea*, the narrators are depicted as in varying degrees self-deceived.² Lewis (1978) recognizes cases such as these, where 'the storyteller purports to be uttering a mixture of truth and lies' and suggests that the way to deal with them is to 'consider those worlds where the act of storytelling really is whatever it purports to be . . . here at our world' (p. 40). However, this suggestion merely highlights the general problem of determining what those worlds are: specifically, which are the truths and which are the lies.³

Other features of narrative content, such as irony, hyperbole, metaphoric or symbolic constructions, changing points of view, and so forth, also threaten Lewis's requirement that a narrator tells only what he *knows*.

At the root of the problem is an underlying assumption in all of Lewis's analyses that, as far as truth in fiction is concerned, there is a sharp distinction to be made between what is presented explicitly, and thus can be accepted as true, and what is not explicitly presented, and thus requires some construction by the reader against an assumed background. But discovering what is true in a fictional world is not characteristically as clearcut as that. An adequate account of reasoning to what is true in fiction needs to capture the fact that at nearly every level the reconstruction of fictional worlds needs to invoke a variety of background data, including recognition of genre, ironical or satirical intent, symbolic or allusive frame, narrative mode, historical context, connotative meanings, and so on.

It is a peculiarity of fictional narrative that it does not simply depict a world, it depicts a world-under-a-description. Acts of storytelling generate intentionality in fictional content; there are not just facts reported but facts-as-told. Lewis (1978) rightly emphasizes the importance of the act of storytelling in identifying fictions:

Different acts of storytelling, different fictions. When Pierre Menard re-tells *Don Quixote*, that is not the same fiction as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* — not even if they are in the same language and match word for word. (p. 39)

But this does not go far enough. Acts of storytelling are individuated not just by storytellers but by the very mode of telling. If Cervantes had retold his story with slight variations he would have generated a different fiction (and world). The predicates in fictive sentences are not externally but internally related to the situations they characterize, in the sense that the particular aspects, attitudes, and values embodied in the predicates help to constitute the situations (events, characters, etc.) depicted. In Borges's story what makes Menard's *Quixote* a different fiction from Cervantes' is not merely that they are told by different people but that the connotations and attitudes conveyed by the very same words differ in the two tellings.

What we learn about a fictional world derives not just from *what is said*, where truth-conditions alone are at issue, but from *how it is said*, where predication, connotation, tone, and point of view, must also be taken into account. In short, a fictional world itself is, as I will put it, constitutively aspectival; the complex network of aspects characterized by the precise narrative mode of presentation in a work of fiction constitutes the world of the work.⁴

A reader's task is to reconstruct this world by identifying and weighing the aspectival (connotative, evaluative, etc.) qualities in the fictive descriptions. This involves much more than simply accepting as true, or as 'known fact', what is explicitly reported. Information about fictional worlds is presented through a series of narrative filters.⁵ Even at the level of

explicit content readers must determine not only what sentences to accept at face value (recognizing unreliable narration, irony, hyperbole, speaker's point of view, etc.) but also what paraphrases of the content of those sentences are licenced (recognizing connotative features, tone, figurative usage, satire, allusion, etc.). If fictional worlds are given under-a-description this places severe constraints on which *re-descriptions* of fictional content accurately record the 'facts'. We can only discover what is true in a fictional world through a clear grasp of the manner in which the world is presented. There is no escape from the introduction of an interpretative element right at the start of our reasoning about fiction.

It might be possible to accommodate this complexity within the terms of Lewis's analysis by broadening the initial characterization of the worlds of a fiction. What is explicitly presented, the narrative content, might be thought of not just as 'known fact' but as *linguistic data* out of which the facts must be (re)constructed. Readers, somewhat like scientists or historians, frame and modify hypotheses about fictional content, assessing the quality and connectedness of the data, attempting to construct (fictional) states of affairs such that they render maximally coherent the evidence available.⁶ The transparency of fictive descriptions should never be taken for granted.

One problem with this proposed revision of Lewis's analysis is that it introduces an element of indeterminacy even in the overt descriptive content of a fiction. If all the 'facts' about a fictional world are subject to a particular way of construing a fictional text then we might seem to have lost the idea of 'facts' altogether, and thus a 'world'. But bearing in mind that fictional worlds are constituted by the (senses of) descriptions in a fictional narrative and accepting that the construal of such descriptions need not itself be indeterminate, we have still retained a recognizable conception of 'truth in fiction'. Of course we do need constraints on the interpretations we place on the textual data. Familiar literary critical constraints — which we might call *principles for the evaluation of content* — operate at the finer level of judgements about tone, irony, point of view, narratorial reliability, etc. At the broader level where we judge global features of the fictional world, more general principles seem to apply: a *presumption of verisimilitude*, for example, which assumes the fictional world to be similar to the real world in the absence of clear indications of respects in which they differ, and a *presumption of truthfulness* which enjoins us to accept as true what we are directly told about the fictional world unless there is specific evidence to doubt this. In the end it is probable that these constraints will yield much the same set of truths as Lewis recognizes at the basic level. But the principles of reasoning are fundamentally different, moving from the concept of a storyteller reporting 'known facts' to the concept of a reader constructing a world by construing (the meaning of) a text.

IV

Let us move to a consideration of the background world which, according to Lewis's analysis, will serve as a basis for our reasoning to what is true *beyond* what is explicit in a narrative. For Lewis this background is either the actual world itself (Analysis 1) or 'one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin' (Analysis 2).

It is helpful to draw a rough distinction between, on the one hand, facts about the physical setting in which a fiction takes place and, on the other hand, more 'theory-laden' facts about the actions, motives, intentions, attitudes, and so on, of the characters in the fiction (narrator included). More often than not the focus of our interest — and disagreements — in reading a novel will be on the latter while we take the former for granted.

Lewis's account of the background world is more readily applicable to the physical than the psychological inferences we are inclined to draw in reading fiction. It would be natural to appeal to generally prevalent beliefs about the physical world at the time the fiction was created as a source for factual information of a physical kind not made explicit in narrative content. Thus, for example, our current scepticism about the influence of the supernatural should not lead us to reason that the witches in *Macbeth* could not have been witches after all. Nor should we conclude, in Lewis's example, from our knowledge that Russell's vipers cannot climb ropes, that in the Sherlock Holmes story 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band' either the snake reached its victim in some other way than climbing the rope or Holmes bungled the case.⁷

The psychological inferences we make over and above what is explicit in a narrative are more complicated than the physical inferences. But they do not differ in principle from the point of view of relying on some construal of textual data. I suggest that there are two different kinds of indeterminacy that affect our reasoning about characters, neither of which can be accommodated on Lewis's account but both of which are of significance to the literary critic. One is a general indeterminacy in characterizing human action, the other an indeterminacy in literary interpretation. Neither indeterminacy can be explained in terms of possible worlds.

First of all, Lewis's appeal to the 'collective belief worlds of the community of origin' of a fiction to guide us in our inferences to what is true in the fiction puts undue restrictions on our understanding of fictional characters or the appropriate (invited) responses to them. One obvious difficulty is that of determining the relevant community. Those beliefs common to an entire society will be so few or so general as to licence only the most mundane inferences. But how could the community be narrowed except in an *ad hoc* way? Lewis might simply concede these points and conclude that the only supplementation that is licenced on human or psychological assessments in a fiction will necessarily be of a low-level

kind; after all, he proposes his analysis precisely to rule out psychoanalytic speculation. But this runs counter to our intuitions. The inferences we draw in a fiction are not limited to physical descriptions and very general psychological facts. Nor are they limited only to beliefs common to the majority in a community. We feel this particularly when we consider innovative works of literature. We want to acknowledge at least the possibility that an author might transcend commonly accepted attitudes and invite us to perceive human characteristics in a way not embodied in the collective beliefs. A simple example might be Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. An ordinary reader of the time who shared the collective beliefs about how young ladies should behave and what attitudes were appropriate to marriage might well have attributed selfish and unreasonable motives to Sue Bridehead. We are not explicitly told that she was selfish or inconsiderate or that she deserved her fate (in fact the opposite is strongly implied) but it seems that whether or not she was, or did, should not be decided merely by appeal to a general moral consensus in Hardy's Britain. It also seems clear that what we say about her intentions and motives is going to be determined, in part at least, by some overall perspective we as readers take on the novel.

It might be objected that the kinds of detailed inferences we are inclined to draw about the psychological attitudes of fictional characters should not be counted among the *truths* in a fiction but at best considered only as *hypotheses*. Lewis's criterion is strictly for what is true in fiction. My reply is twofold. First, a great deal of our reasoning to what is true in fiction is hypothetical in nature. This is partly a consequence of the idea developed earlier that we should treat a given text not as a report of known facts about a (fictional) world but as a set of linguistically-based data awaiting construal according to general interpretative principles. In that sense hypothesizing (about meaning) occurs at the most fundamental level. Second, the hypotheses we advance about fictional characters and actions often share just the kind of indeterminacy or relativity that we find in our judgements about the actual world (or actual people). They cannot be dismissed simply as 'truth-value gaps'. There is a difference between the kind of indeterminacy that afflicts fiction *qua* fiction, for example the number of Lady Macbeth's children,⁸ and the kind of indeterminacy that directly reflects an indeterminacy in the actual world, for example concerning attitudes, beliefs, desires, and so on, as expressed in a fiction. Lewis's account has to run these together.

Let me develop this last difficulty in more detail. According to Lewis we have a truth-value gap wherever some proposition is true in some worlds of a fiction and false in others, given that these worlds all differ least from the background world. While I would agree that propositions for which we have no evidence at all, either from the text or from the background, might best be considered as lacking a truth-value, I do not

think we should automatically dismiss in the same way all propositions about a character's (or narrator's) attitudes and beliefs over which there is some indeterminacy. I am inclined to say, at least of some propositions of this kind, that they are true on some readings of the text, false on others; or that they are true *relative to an interpretation*.

To say that a proposition is true relative to an interpretation is to say something more than just that it is true in some worlds and false in others. The former might entail the latter but it is not equivalent to it. An interpretation is not a world, though it might help determine a world. This is again where the interests of the literary critic diverge from those of the logician. We form hypotheses about characters from the evidence before us and we take the hypotheses as true in relation to the fictional world (or worlds) determined by them. But many such hypotheses, for example about the reliability or point of view of a narrator, will determine in an all-embracing way what we take the specified truths to be. There is something like a hermeneutic circle here. A general interpretative scheme will determine many of the truths within a fictional world, but these truths will in turn give support to the interpretation. There is no neutral ground from which to judge the truth of such propositions.

The hypothetical nature of some of our inferences about fictional characters reflects an indeterminacy in the explanation of action. To explain a person's actions is at least partly to show them to be consistent with propositional attitudes held by the agent. We say that an agent has acted rationally precisely in case his beliefs and desires provide him with a reason for doing as he did. The trouble is the only way we can discover his propositional attitudes is to observe his actions (including what he says); having beliefs and desires is (at least partly) being disposed to act in certain ways. But in turn to understand his actions, to call them intentional or rational, we need to know something about his propositional attitudes. There is a circle here, comparable to the hermeneutic circle, which we can only break into by making some initial suppositions about an agent, for example that he acts consistently for the most part.

On one level, rational action is not something we discover, it is something we assume. The concept of a person is conceptually linked with that of rationality. Here I follow Davidson (1976):

Crediting people with a large degree of consistency cannot be counted mere charity. . . . [T]o the extent that we fail to discover a coherent and plausible pattern in the attitudes and actions of others we simply forego the chance of treating them as persons. (pp. 96–7)

But there need not be any one coherent pattern, any single or correct theory or explanation, which alone captures and makes sense of the evidence available.

Exactly parallel observations, I believe, apply also to the interpretation

of fiction. We need to make initial assumptions about the coherence of a work of fiction before we are able to reason to what is true in that work. And we would not expect any one interpretation to accommodate uniquely the evidence that the text provides for our reasoning. How far can we press the parallel between our reasoning about human motivation and our reasoning to what is true in fiction? At one level of course the parallel is close because much of our interest in fiction — at least literary fiction — will precisely involve issues about human motivation. Making sense of a fictional character calls for many of the same kinds of judgements as are required in explaining any (real) human action.

But there is a further, more interesting, parallel which sheds light on the literary critical nature of some of our reasoning about fiction. It also highlights the second source of indeterminacy in that reasoning, as mentioned earlier. The parallel is between making sense of human action and offering a literary interpretation. Literary interpretation applied to fiction is quite unlike the kind of reasoning described by Lewis. It is not a matter of discovering truths about a world so much as assigning thematic significance to component parts of a work. It is a search for coherence and sense. It involves making connections by subsuming more and more elements in a work under a network of thematic concepts.⁹ Part of this literary interpretation will involve making sense of the actions and thoughts of characters. But interpretation goes well beyond that. It is also concerned with general themes or symbolic structures which bind together all the elements in a work, not just psychological factors. Again there is no *a priori* reason why any one interpretation should capture all the possible or interesting connections.

Peter Jones (1975) has suggested various respects in which ‘understanding-a-novel’ is comparable to ‘understanding-a-person’. ‘To understand a person’, he writes, ‘involves not only judging his behaviour to consist of actions that are purposeful and pointful, but grasping their point, and perhaps seeing grounds for their appropriateness in the context’ (p. 196). Similarly, to understand a novel we must assume that ‘the work is purposive’, though ‘this does not commit us to search for the *actual* purposes that informed the work’ (p. 197). Jones’s account of what he calls ‘creative interpretation’ allows for the possibility that different readers will postulate different purposes for different elements in a work; they might ‘take’ the text in different ways, find different significance in it, and so on. We could say that on this view literary interpretation is radically underdetermined by the evidence supplied by the literary text.

A similar view has been developed more recently by Ronald Dworkin (1986), who compares literary interpretation and interpretation in law. Dworkin characterizes interpretation as follows:

Interpretation of works of art and social practices . . . is indeed essentially concerned with purpose not cause. But the purposes in play are not (fundamentally) those of some author but of the interpreter. Roughly, constructive interpretation is a matter of

imposing purpose on an object or practice in order to make of it the best possible example of the form or genre to which it is taken to belong. It does not follow, even from that rough account, that an interpreter can make of a practice or work of art anything he would have wanted it to be . . . For the history or shape of a practice or object constrains the available interpretations of it . . . Creative interpretation, on the constructive view, is a matter of interaction between purpose and object. (p. 52)

According to this view, common to Jones and Dworkin, interpretation by its very nature is 'constructive' or 'creative' in that it involves the postulation of purpose or significance. It is concerned with projected *meanings* rather than given *facts*. Lewis's model of fictions as possible worlds makes radically different assumptions about what it is to understand fictional content. While Lewis sees reasoning to what is true in fiction as a quasi-factual investigation about objectively given worlds, the Jones/Dworkin view emphasizes the interpreter and the search for sense and connectedness. Truth is relativized to interpretation. This hermeneutic view introduces an indeterminacy quite different from that of the 'truth-value gap'.

Interpretation in the Jones/Dworkin sense provides a framework within which we can reason to particular fictional truths. A good example of this 'creative interpretation' and the truths it generates can be found in Jones's reading of *Middlemarch*. Jones (1978) sees George Eliot's novel as presenting a complex theory of the imagination. Here is one part of his argument:

The third role of imagination is in the sympathetic understanding of other men; such understanding cannot be reached by those exclusively concerned with themselves, but it rests upon the use of imagination to interpret the outward signs of men's inner lives. Lydgate and Casaubon differed entirely on the uses to which they put their constructive imagination in their professional work; but they both failed to see that such imagination is also essential in their social lives. The mental world of the imagination is quite separate from the actual world in which we live; to connect the two demands a disciplined exercise of will-power. (p. 48)

In this, and the rest of his discussion, Jones offers a number of philosophical concepts and hypotheses as a framework for finding significance and connectedness in the novel: concepts such as 'constructive imagination', 'sympathetic understanding', 'disciplined exercise of will-power', and so on. Within this framework, judgements can be made about what is 'true in the fiction', for example about the characters and their attitudes: hence Jones' judgement that 'Lydgate and Casaubon . . . failed to see that such imagination is . . . essential in their social lives'. This judgement is only made possible by the interpretative framework within which it is set.

It is hard to see what status such a judgement could be given on Lewis's account. Because it might be true in some possible worlds derived from the novel and false in others, Lewis would have to categorize it as 'neither true nor false'. But that does no justice to its peculiar status as part of a literary (and philosophical) interpretation. The kind of reasoning that Jones undertakes to arrive at such a judgement is not a reasoning about

'facts' in a possible world. It makes no appeal to 'collective belief worlds'. Rather it involves its own imaginative re-construction of the text; it proposes a new 'way of looking' at the textual data, a new conception of the novel's thematic coherence. A large number of critical judgements are of this kind and are familiar to literary critics. We must, I suggest, assess these judgements as *truths relative to an interpretation*. Needless to say, we must not suppose that any judgement whatsoever can acquire the title of truth in this way. The judgements correctly deemed to be truths will need to be well supported by a plausible and consistent interpretation, subject at least to the constraining principles mentioned earlier for evaluating narrative content.

I have suggested a parallel between literary interpretation and Davidson's view of human action, conceived as a search for coherence on the assumption of rationality. The parallel is supported by the view of 'creative interpretation' developed by Jones and Dworkin. But it would be a mistake to suppose that literary interpretation is entirely assimilable to the ways we make sense of human action (Jones) or social practices (Dworkin). There is much that is *sui generis* in literary interpretation. The conventions for making sense of a literary work and for exploring connections within a work, as well as the concepts we apply in interpretation, are all rooted in a distinctive practice of literary criticism. Critical reasoning in support of hypotheses such as Jones's on *Middlemarch* is subject to specific principles of evidence and argument. Although I have not looked in detail at these principles it should at least be clear from the conclusions we have drawn, and the examples themselves, that the principles go well beyond those embodied in Lewis's Analyses 1 and 2. The possible-world model is not adequate to explain the kind of reasoning that is an indispensable part of literary interpretation.

V

We have come a long way from Lewis's original analyses. It has certainly not been my intention to reject the entire enterprise in which Lewis is engaged. My concern has been to identify points of tension between the logician's approach to 'truth in fiction' and the requirements of the literary critic. According to Lewis, our reasoning to what is true in fiction is counterfactual; we make inferences about what *would* be the case in worlds where the story is told as known fact, setting the data directly presented in the narrative against a wider background world. There is no objection to the idea that at a basic level we sometimes reason counterfactually about fiction in order to fill out a fictional world. But from the point of view of the literary critic this can at best be only part of the procedure for determining what is true of such a world.

The details that Lewis provides, both about the direct data in a narrative and the background world by which we generate inferences, are not adequate to the complexities recognized by literary critics. First of all, treating explicit narrative content as comprising worlds in which the story is 'told as known fact' fails to take into account the many different kinds of narrative strategy familiar in literary fictions, such as unreliable narration, shifting points of view, connotation, and so on. I have proposed instead that we treat narrative sentences not as reporting facts but as embodying facts, requiring the reader not just to accept what is given but to construe what is given. This is still within the spirit of Lewis's account. I suggested that certain principles (or working assumptions) operate in our initial sorting of fictional truths: principles of coherence, verisimilitude, and trustworthiness, as well as specific critical principles about textual meaning.

Secondly, Lewis's account of the background world as 'the collective belief worlds of the community of origin' of the fiction, to which we appeal in making inferences beyond what is explicitly presented, is also inadequate for literary criticism. The account might be sufficient for reasoning about facts in the physical world, but it is too limited to do justice to literary critical hypotheses about character and theme. On such matters we need some concept of *interpretation*. At one level we have the kind of interpretation that Davidson introduces in understanding human action. At another level we have more distinctively literary interpretation which identifies thematic development in a fictional narrative. With the concept of interpretation comes the idea of indeterminacy. Rather than supposing there are determinate *facts* to be discovered about the worlds of a literary fiction, we must work with the idea of *truths relative to interpretative frameworks*. But this indeterminacy or relativity is not reducible to 'truth-value gaps'.

In effect I have introduced, on behalf of the literary critic, complexities at every stage of Lewis's analysis. It might be that a separate formal analysis could be offered for the revised conception of 'truth relative to an interpretation'. But it is far from clear that any simple formalized principle could capture the kind of reasoning that a critic undertakes to arrive at, and support, an interpretation. The value of any very general principle would be questionable. It might be argued that my objections to Lewis apply only to *literary* fictions and that his aim is to produce a principle applicable to *all* fiction, or fiction *per se*. Certainly not all fiction is literature and maybe not all literature is fiction. But I think that our response to literary fiction is on a continuum with our response to any fiction. Rudimentary interpretative procedures apply at the most basic level of reading, certainly at the level Lewis is concerned with, where we make reasoned inferences about narrative content. The imposition of meaning in a fictional narrative, over and above the discovery of facts in a

possible world, is an indispensable part of our reasoning to what is true in fiction.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of the relations between narrative and fictionality, see Lamarque (1989).

² For a discussion of some of the issues, see Lamarque (1978).

³ Lewis has more to say about unreliable narration in Lewis (1983), pp. 279–80. For a discussion of these points, see Lamarque (1987).

⁴ The point could also be made, though more misleadingly I believe, by saying that the *content* of a fictional narrative is not distinct from its *form* of presentation; this is one way that fiction differs from non-fiction. See Lamarque (forthcoming).

⁵ Walton (1976) gives a useful account of how a narrator, conceived as a fictional character, 'mediates the reader's access to the rest of the fictional world', p. 50.

⁶ For a discussion of the phenomenology of reading, involving 'an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection', see Iser (1974), pp. 274–294.

⁷ It seems unlikely that there were *any* generally prevalent beliefs in England at the end of the last century about the rope-climbing capacities of the Russell's viper. Perhaps, with the story, Conan Doyle *created* such beliefs.

⁸ See Knights (1946).

⁹ For a clear account of the principles of literary interpretation, see Olsen (1978).

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