

Depth psychological literary criticism: Some methodological questions

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The problems we come across when assessing the validity of depth psychological interpretations of literary works are huge. How do we know whether an interpretation is adequate to the text involved? Can we, by the same token, prove that certain interpretations are inadequate? If so, how? If not – that is to say, if any depth psychological interpretation is always supposed to be as good as any other –, what is the intellectual status of exploring literary texts from a depth psychological perspective? Indeed, what are we looking for when we use that particular method of literary interpretation? The paper will deal with this type of questions on the basis of some telling examples.

THE DOMAIN OF TRUTH VERSUS THE DOMAIN OF MEANINGFULNESS

The methodology of depth psychological literary criticism may perhaps not seem a particularly juicy subject, but it is certainly an important one. Interdisciplinary types of academic research – and particularly the less-established ones, such as the psychological study of the arts – quite obviously need to consider how they can account for academic quality. How can we make sure that our interpretation does justice to the work of art involved? Or even that it is not pure nonsense for that matter? I do not mean this in a political sense, to raise more money (though that would be good too), but more fundamentally: apart from all the excellent practical research that is conducted in the field of the psychological study of the arts in general and literature-and-psychology in particular, there is also an intrinsic need for theoretical reflection.

In order to attain a clear view of the matter under investigation a few preliminary issues have to be dealt with. First of all we have to distinguish between the so-called *domain of truth* and the *domain of meaningfulness*. Ultimately, this distinction is of Kantian origin, as Immanuel Kant introduced into the philosophy of science the idea that intuition (*Anschauung*), intellect (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) each have their different goals and different fields of application. Both intuition and intellect aim at establishing a type of truth that, according to Kant, might refer to the empirical world, whereas the cognitional object of reason is of a fundamentally different kind: it may entail paradoxical yet meaningful notions that are very difficult to establish as ‘true’ in any normal sense of

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the word¹. The difference between truth and meaningfulness was also emphasized by prominent members of the Vienna Circle, such as Otto Neurath and Rudolph Carnap, and also – though from a different perspective – by Hannah Ahrendt. More recently the contemporary Dutch philosopher L.M. de Rijk has pointed out that the current, global, clashes between scientific and religious world views might be avoided if both parties would realize that they actually operate in different areas of life: religion functions best when it operates primarily in the field of meaningfulness, whereas science, in order to be fruitful, should attempt to limit itself first and foremost to the field of truth².

When it comes to explore what depth psychological literary criticism is about, the same fundamental distinction between striving for truth and striving for meaningfulness is relevant. It seems quite evident that depth psychological literary criticism as an academic discipline aims to contribute to our knowledge and therefore operates primarily within the realm of truth, whereas its object, literature, principally belongs to the realm of meaningfulness.

Obviously, any distinction is a bit artificial, and in practice there may be a lot of overlap, but to my mind it is worthwhile to stick at least to the conceptual difference between truth and meaningfulness, because that will help us realize what we try to establish when we interpret literary works. While literary criticism may be meaningful, at least as a scholarly activity it will also attempt to be as clear as possible, according to the motto ‘what you see is what you get’. For example, in academic literary interpretation unexplained double meanings are not welcome, and least of all unintended ones. By reading an academic interpretation readers expect to learn something. They hope to find a clear point and a sound argumentation. Certain elements of the *interpretandum* may be vague, so that it would be impossible to write in a very clear way about them, but the interpreter should at least try to come to some understanding and to explain things to the reader. Literary texts, on the other hand, are not about the world as such, but about how we see the world, that is to say literature is about ourselves. For example, if you read a book, that is to say fiction, you dive into ‘untrue’, sometimes very implausible or illogical events, but if you are really swept away, then you may realise that you are never as much yourself as when you read literature. It’s just you and the fascinating world of the book. You don’t have to play a social role and care about what others might think of you. If you are really touched by your reading, then you feel at home, and that is because somehow the book is you, or appeals to possibilities within you. In other words, the book – literature in general – conveys meaning, and great literature conveys deep meaning.

Distinguishing between a realm of truth and a realm of meaningfulness does, of course, not at all imply that one of the two would be intrinsically superior to the other. Both realms may be equally important in life, and anyway truth and meaningfulness are both completely legitimate human concerns. However, in an academic context – such as the natural sciences, history, theology, (depth) psychology, philosophy, and literary criticism – it makes sense to strive for truth in an academic sense. In literary criticism we attempt to formulate interpretations on the basis of a preferably explicit and controllable type of argumentation, so that our interpretation is open to reasonable objections. And that is very different from the goals in the realm of meaningfulness, such as literature, art, religion, jokes, depth psychological therapy, mythology, love, etc. If artists produce works of art, they consciously or unconsciously convey meaning, or if someone is religiously involved he or she is again looking for meaningfulness, and not for an empirically testable theoretical reconstruction of the physical world outside.

As to an example of what happens if the two realms are confused: in the Netherlands there is a range of disappointed, formerly heavily religious writers and scholars who time and again attempt to unmask for example biblical texts as untrue. They will explain things like that Methuselah could not

¹ Depending on the type of discourse the word ‘truth’ can mean many different things, and in discussions about what is to be regarded as ‘true’ people tend to bring in all kinds of metaphysical assumptions of which they are not always aware. Following Kant and later philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper, the present article uses ‘truth’ in the sense of *logically and/or empirically testable* truth.

² See De Rijk 2008, pp. 216-228 and De Rijk 2010, pp. 134 ff.

really have been 969 years of age when he died, because that is biologically impossible. The golden calf that the Israelites in the desert were supposed to have forged out of their golden earrings probably did not really exist either, because in order to create a statue that is big enough to dance around with some hundreds of people you need a lot of gold. It is unlikely that the Israelites would have possessed so much gold. And to melt gold is a very complicated thing that asks for an advanced level of technology; you need an oven of 1063 degrees or more. You cannot make such an oven on the spot when you are travelling through a desert. In short: these interpreters take an old mythic story literally, decide that it is untrue, and then – why not? – reject religion as a whole. Now that is confusing the two realms. At the moment one of these Dutch authors is busy unmasking the Qur'an as untrue, claiming that the botanical information in the Qur'an is incorrect. That may be so, but who cares? That way you could also say that the story of Little Red Riding Hood is highly untrustworthy and actually unacceptable, because firstly wolves do not usually speak and secondly it is hard to believe that anyone would always wear the same red hood. That is not an appropriate approach for fairy tales, and it isn't appropriate for literature and art either, nor for any other subject in the realm of meaningfulness.

THREE THEORIES OF TRUTH: CORRESPONDENCE THEORY, COHERENCE THEORY AND 'ANYTHING GOES'

We have been talking now for a while about truth as opposed to meaningfulness, and I came up with the perhaps counter-intuitive suggestion that literary criticism as an academic discipline belongs to the realm of truth. This raises the question how we can achieve 'truth'. Obviously such a huge subject cannot be dealt with in a satisfactory way in a short paper like the present one, but let me just say a few words.

In the philosophy of science it is common practice to speak of at least three different theories of truth, namely the correspondence, coherence, and consensus theory of truth. Another term for 'correspondence theory of truth' is '(philosophical) realism'.

About realism, ever since Kant it is generally accepted within the philosophy of science that at least naïve realism gets us into serious trouble, that is to say in an academic context – in the field of the humanities as well as in the field of the natural sciences – naïve, direct realism gets us into contradictions and worse. Naïve realism is a kind of intellectual imperialism. It presupposes that there is an unambiguous reality out there and that this reality can be discovered just like that, without epistemological problems. One of the troubles with this altogether unreflected theory of truth is that it suffocates all appetite to look beyond the immediately tangible. Naïve realism is based on rather primitive Enlightenment ideas, such as that the combination of rationality and empirical research simply and automatically leads to objective, that is to say absolute, knowledge. Because of its absoluteness, this supposed knowledge leaves no room for alternative views, nor for serious cognitive progress. In other words, naïve realism is rather limited and easily leads to cognitive stagnation.

As to not-naïve, well-defended realism or correspondence theory (Sir Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore are two of the most famous names in this connection), this type of theory is not so easily refuted, and what is more, when it comes to the practice of academic research there is often no need to fight against the more sophisticated forms of realism or correspondence theory, because in their methodology to establish truth they do not necessarily differ from other theories of truth, such as the coherence theory, to which we will turn our attention in a few minutes.

In the course of the twentieth century, scholars of fame used to focus mostly on the shortcomings of the correspondence theory. Perhaps rightly so. However, I got my education relatively late in the last century, and personally I suffered much more from the other extreme, namely from the highly relativistic theories of truth that were en vogue in the 70s and 80s, such as 'anything goes'. The 'anything goes' theory belongs to the so-called consensus theory of truth.

In its purest appearance the ‘anything goes’ theory is a form of nihilism: there is nothing but rhetoric and power; there are no reasonable arguments whatsoever; everything is merely a matter of opinion; the medium is the message. Also, it is an ideal cloak for ignorance: researchers can stop thinking, and deliver bad work without having to feel guilty. (There maybe other reasons as well why some researchers seek to avoid reasonable discussion about their work, such as fear or perhaps modesty. For example, an interpreter of a first century Latin novel, the *Satyricon*, will explicitly state about (a part of) his own interpretation that it is at best one observer’s reading of the novel at one particular moment. Thus he makes sure his interpretation cannot be proven wrong, which is good, but unfortunately this also means that he does not say anything at all.)

The idea behind the ‘anything goes’ theory seems to be that we all have our own, personal perspectives and personal ways of understanding literature, and that we should leave it at that. Some existing interpretations even manage to combine ‘anything goes’ theory with straightforward, old-fashioned, naïve realism, thereby falling into both, contradictory, traps at the same time. In such an interpretation the reader is, for example, informed first that he or she simply has to believe the current psychoanalytic literary interpretation, because the interpretation is really, honestly true. In some cases this may also be accompanied by a mild threat: should the reader refuse to believe the true interpretation that is unfolded before his or her very eyes, then he or she is apparently repressing something and will have to pay for it. And then in the next paragraph of the same interpretation the interpreter blandly tells the reader something like: ‘Don’t come up with any critique please, because you have your opinion, I have mine, and any opinion is as good as any other. So, don’t attack me, anything goes.’ It seems to me that in an academic context the ‘anything goes’ argument will not do. Yes, we all have our different perspectives, but if we want to come to some knowledge at all, we cannot leave it at that. We also have to make some effort to get somewhere.

Therefore, a more subtle approach is to be preferred, to be found in the so-called coherence theory of truth. ‘Coherence’ is the cornerstone of any academic discipline, a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*, not only in the natural sciences but also in the field of the humanities. (Of course, in order for a theory to be academically worthwhile coherence is not a sufficient condition: for example, the telephone book may be very coherent, yet it is not an academic work.)

The methodology of the coherence theory of truth is very much in line with Popper’s Critical Rationalism, Bas van Fraassen’s Constructive Empiricism, etc. They all agree that reliable knowledge about the world cannot be based upon correspondence, but must be based upon coherence. That is not to say that there can be no correspondence between thought and objective reality, but correspondence as such cannot be tested. Suppose that one of the participants of a literature-and-psychology course is in reality an alien, a green little fellow that normally says bleep-bleep all the time; however, in order to gain detailed information about the Earth his superiors have transformed him into a perfect student look-alike, and they plan to beam him up right after the course so that he may tell them all there is to know about lit & psych. If the aliens did their job well, so that no one can tell the student look-alike apart from a regular human being, then it would be quite unreasonable if the teacher would accuse the poor fellow of being an alien, and for example would refuse to grade him, even though in this case this would correspond exactly with reality. The thing is that correspondence as such simply cannot be proven. The only possible proof of truth is found in sound argumentation, that is to say in coherence. The best reconstruction of reality is always the most coherent one, namely the theory that fits best with all the elements that are supposed to be relevant. For example, in the empirical sciences it is quite normal to recognise that empirical research does not test against absolute facts, but against *what we think* are facts, because no supposed facts can be seen as completely independent from theory. Or in Norwood Russell Hanson’s terminology: not just theories themselves, but also the so-called facts are theory-laden³. Of course we may have good reasons to think that something is actually the case (is a fact), but nonetheless facts are eventually constructions too. They are not completely objective, but depend at least in part on the perspective that we consciously or unconsciously adopt.

³ Hanson 1972 [1958].

From this it follows that in the end there is no absolute certainty that we know reality for what it is. Our best shot is that we construct a picture of reality on the basis of sound, coherent argumentation.

One last example: the great early seventeenth century physicist, mathematician and astronomer Galileo is rightly famous for placing the sun, not the earth, in the centre of the solar system, like Copernicus had done before him. Galileo improved the existing contemporary theories, not because his heliocentric theory in some magical way corresponded with objective reality, but because he could prove with arguments that his theory was more coherent with the rest of our established astronomical knowledge as well as with relevant empirical data than competing theories about the universe. This example illustrates quite well that the coherence theory of truth is all about argumentation and proof, and not about mere social acceptance. Socially speaking Galileo's ideas got him into a lot of trouble. The Roman Catholic Church back then didn't care for arguments, only for politics and power, so they locked him up and forced him to recant his earlier statements. The Church had the power, but Galileo had the better argumentation, as he knew quite well: "Eppur' si muove."

To my mind, it is precisely this quest for coherence that is also crucial for interpretations of literature and art. Ideally, literary interpretations do neither present themselves as absolute, ontological truths nor as just arbitrary views, but as something in between. The best interpretation is not the one that corresponds to reality (whatever that may be), but the one that presents us with an interesting reconstruction of reality, one that accounts for a lot of data and is open to critique on reasonable grounds. Thus far from being a merely personal form of expression, a good literary interpretation will pave the way for an ongoing interesting, reasonable discussion.

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