

FOUNDATIONS OF A SCIENTIFIC COGNITIVE THEORY  
FOR LITERARY CRITICISM

by

John C. Bronsted

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Prisca Augustyn, Department of Languages, Linguistics & Comparative Literature, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.


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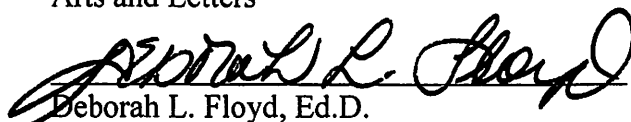
  
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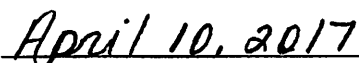
  
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## ABSTRACT

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Based on Noam Chomsky's argument that the faculty of language is primarily a tool of thought whose purpose is to interpret the world, this dissertation argues that reading literature provides a cognitive experience like John Gardner's "Fictive Dream" that mimics our interpretive experience of the world. Literary experience exploits language as an epistemological faculty that makes aspects of the external world intelligible. Yet the faculty of language is also capable of evoking entirely mental worlds that do not reflect the mind-external world. Because the literary experience is entirely mind-internal, even the cultural knowledge we bring into play for its understanding still relies on innate features of language. Thus, during the act of reading, we hold this cultural knowledge in abeyance, allowing the text to structure how we bring it to bear on the experience as a whole.

A scientific approach to literature can help uncover principles to further elucidate the literary-epistemological experience. Whereas much literary criticism assumes that a

critic's purpose is to mine a text for its deeper meaning, this dissertation argues for a Cognitive Formalist approach in which criticism serves not simply to explain the experience evoked by any particular text according to linguistic-epistemological principles, but also to evaluate the moral implications of that specific textual experience.

As a means of demonstrating potential implications of a scientific cognitive approach to literary criticism based on linguistic-epistemological understanding, the current study offers sample passages from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. These passages allow us to offer first approximations of some explanatory principles of the literary-epistemological experience, such as the importance of fictive time and fictional event sequences, which in turn gives us greater insight into how, for example, verb tense and aspect contribute to the evocation of the action of fiction in the reader's mind. Ultimately, the fictive vantage point constructed by the text allows the reader access to a complex moral framework in which fictive characters are understood to make choices that will in turn set the stage for the reader's own ethical reception of the text and the experience it offers.

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*Anyone who teaches at age fifty what he was teaching at age twenty-five had better find another profession. If in twenty-five years nothing has happened which proves to you that your ideas were wrong, it means that you are not in a living field, or perhaps are part of a religious sect.*

— Noam Chomsky (1977, p. 177-8)



## INTRODUCTION

This *essai* will discuss the way in which we understand literary texts. There is a sharp distinction between the way in which ordinary readers understand literary texts and the way in which contemporary literary critics do so, at least in the praxis of their discipline: for the ordinary reader, reading a good book induces an *experience*, an immersive transportation; whereas for the literary critic, a literary text must be *interpreted*, its hidden meaning dug out and then presented to other literary critics. This has not always been the case. Aristotle's *Poetics* announces its program to "treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each" (p. 3), an inductive program to determine the nature of our experience of literary objects in the world. In the twentieth century, the New Criticism, with its "commitment to the autonomy of the literary text . . . led to a commitment to interpretation as the proper activity of criticism" (Culler 1976, p. 245) that has survived even within the postmodern overthrow of formalist assumptions in literary criticism: Roland Barthes, in his poststructuralist mood, having dispatched the Author from the text as the source of its meaning, insists that "writing ceaselessly posits meaning" (Barthes 1968, p. 1325), declaring the reader as the arbiter of meaning for a text: that is, the text is open to interpretation.

However, the philosophical insights for epistemology that Noam Chomsky derives from his "cognitive revolution" in linguistics have important consequences for the way in which critics ought to approach literary texts. Interpretation does not seem to

be the appropriate activity of critics, as the transportive experience of ordinary readers is itself the fundamental *meaning* of any text: interpretation is entirely additive.

Nevertheless, there is a role for critics that hearkens back to the program of Aristotle to understand literature as a natural object, to uncover its properties and the principles that give rise to its effects and by which its various and individual examples can be categorized and explicated. Such a cognitive approach can help us develop what Northrop Frye called a “genuine criticism” that “progresses toward making the whole of literature intelligible” (1957, p. 9) according to a scientific understanding. Additionally, this program will open the door for what Wayne Booth calls “Ethical Criticism,” or “ways of talking about the ethical quality of the experience of narrative in itself” (1988, p. 10), which has been a more- and less-acknowledged aspect of criticism for centuries, even when explicitly denied. Ultimately, the cognitive paradigm as revolutionized by Chomsky has vast implications for the way in which we conceive of literary texts which additionally might reorient the discipline and practice of literary criticism.

## PART ONE: THE THEORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

### 1 - Literary Theory and Problems of Interpretation

Literary criticism has been dominated by what Jonathan Culler describes as a “commitment to interpretation as the proper activity of criticism” (Culler 1976, p. 245). In order to determine the appropriate interpretation of a literary text, critics throughout the past century have pursued some theoretical framework that they might apply beyond their own introspection that would give literary interpretation an objective standard. This gave rise to various kinds of literary theory, which Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982) describe as “the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general” (p. 723). Stanley Fish (1985) points out that this pursuit has generated two opposing camps in literary theory: the foundationalists, who believe such a set of “foundational” rules is available, and the anti-foundationalists, who Fish believes have shown that no such rules are possible. Fish sides with the anti-foundationalists in believing that the interpretation of meaning relies on the contingencies of context, including “a speaker, with an intention and purpose, in a situation” (p. 438) and so there is no possibility of verification.

Knapp and Michaels argue against both foundational and anti-foundational theory by claiming that the intended meaning is identical to any interpreted meaning we get from a text so that “the project of grounding becomes incoherent” (Knapp and Michaels 1982, p. 724). In some sense they are simply recapitulating the argument of Wimsatt and

Beardsley in “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), but the import of their argument arises from the assumption that the author could be a source of interpretive verification (e.g. Hirsch 1967). By arguing that intended meaning was identical to the interpreted meaning of a text, Knapp and Michaels simply eliminate the need for any kind of verification, giving free rein to the praxis of literary criticism. They conclude that any kind of “Theory”-seeking is inconsequential to the *practice* of literary criticism. Their argument came in part as a response to the advent of poststructuralist theories being brought into literary criticism in the prior decade that also argued for the freedom of interpretation: for example, Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” likewise argues that the author should not be the site of verification for the meaning of a text, but that any meaning the reading creates will suffice.

In fact, there are two kinds of meaning that can be derived from a literary text that therefore define the critical perspective: the first is the *reflexive* meaning, the first-order *experience* of a literary text brought about by the surface meanings of the language that induce the swirl of character and event that comprise what John Gardner calls the “Fictive Dream.” The second kind of meaning is a *reflective* meaning, or one that is the result of reflection upon the experience of reading, an interpretation brought about by close consideration of aspects of the reflexive experience to derive some additive meaning suggested by the way in which people and the world are construed by the text. Peter J. Rabinowitz (1992) points out that “we tend to accept as a matter of course that good reading is slow, attentive to linguistic nuance . . . and suspicious of surface meanings” (p. 230). Our experience of character and event do not count as critical reading: there is a “tendency to treat the concrete and specific as if they ‘stand for’ . . .

some more general and abstract states” (p. 235). The critical assumption has been, over the years, that the reflective approach to text is the appropriate one, and the reflexive experience of the text must be further interpreted, dug into to discover the “real” meaning.

This kind of reflective reading, what is commonly called “close reading,” “inevitably brings in its wake a questionable literary hierarchy” (Rabinowitz 1992, p. 232) because there results a “circular process of assigning value to what fits our prior conceptions of reading” (p. 233). In common discourse, a *literary* text, contrasted with other kinds of text, is one that is replete with such reflective interpretations: that is, literary texts are considered to be more dissectible and offering more nuance than ordinary texts: these are literary art, not mere text. Susan Sontag (1966) notes that “it is still assumed that a work of art *is* its content . . . a work of art by definition says something” (emphasis original, p. 740). For example, critics will generally place James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the category of the literary, presuming that it seeks to express some deep meaning beyond Leopold Bloom’s errantry in Dublin, while the status of popular beach-fiction is much more contested. While that contest may be hard-fought depending on the critics involved, the criterion for inclusion seems to rest on a notion of nuance or depth, whether or not a text rewards reflective interpretation that can elicit some further meaning that a merely experiential read would not provide. This reflective meaning is not mere ambiguity or polysemy, which only affect the “surface” meaning, and generally only momentarily (if at all) during the experience of the reading, but rather something “beneath” the surface that is supposed to be a consequence of the way in which human beings and events are construed within the story. “Interpretation thus presupposes a

discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers” (Sontag 1966, p. 741). This intuition about the literary text is the foundational excuse for the project of contemporary literary criticism: that is, the task of critics is thought to be the reading of literary texts in order to attempt to disentangle such nuances, to dissect text and uncover hidden depths of meaning. And yet, whether or not a particular text is literary seems to depend on the perspective taken on it by a critic, if the text is presumed to offer greater depths of meaning than its mere “surface” meaning. Such reflective meaning, then, is only the result of the intentions of the reader-critic and not of the text.

Stanley Fish observes, “like all interpreters, [critics] are engaged in the project of determining intention, of asking ‘What does he or she or they or it *mean*?’” (Fish 1995, p. 14). Intentions, however, are a feature of human agency and will, not of the strict linguistic meaning of the text. This means that intended meaning must be a *post hoc* reflective meaning upon the reflexive surface meaning, as when we must determine whether someone means what they said literally or suggestively: the classic example demonstrates, the wife *intends* by saying, “It’s cold,” to suggest that her husband close the window. The ability for an interlocutor or reader to reconstruct the intentions of a speaker or author (or even a fictional character) relies on their ability to represent those intentions in a faithful way, which requires sufficient knowledge of the speaker or author (or character). This is why context matters, including the kinds of social factors that the predominance of critics concern themselves with. So, for Stanley Fish standing in front of a classroom when a student was “vigorously waving his hand,” the “meaning of his gesture,” that “he was seeking permission to speak,” derives from “knowledge of what was involved in being a student,” which was the context of the action and comprised “the

source of our interpretive unanimity [in] a structure of interests and understood goals” (Fish 1980, p. 1028). Nevertheless, Lisa Zunshine points out that “we have cognitive adaptations that prompt us to ‘see bodies as animated by minds’” and hence are predisposed to “explain the student’s behavior in terms of his underlying thoughts, beliefs, and desires” (Zunshine 2006, p. 15). In order to determine intended meaning, Fish must put himself in the place of the student and presume what kind of thoughts, beliefs, and desires the student might have: this requires Fish’s mind to represent the physical and social situation to some degree in order to determine institutional roles and other factors that might impinge upon the kinds of intentions a student might have by the mere fact of his being construed by Fish as a *student*. However, this kind of intended meaning, inasmuch as it does require a context, never can be verified. For this kind of meaning, the anti-foundationalists are likely correct: there is no foundation on which *intention* can be determined because a fundamentally unaccountable context of intention is human agency: we simply do not have the means to faithfully account for what is perceived as freedom of the will, either by theory or by mental representation. In the seeking of a foundation by which to interpret intention, it must be the case that we necessarily come up against this stubborn black box out of which intention emerges fully formed and unaccounted.

The problem of agency reveals the important property of *creativity* in intention. The linguist Noam Chomsky often quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt’s description of language as the “infinite use of finite means,” referring (in Chomsky’s terms) to the use of lexical units within a finite set of syntactic rules in order to derive a potentially infinite array of possible expressions. And while Chomsky has focused his efforts in determining

the nature of those “finite means,” the “infinite use” to which they are put remains unaccountable. There seems to be no explanation for why it is we produce the sentences that we do in any of the various places we employ the faculty of language, and, even if we can determine the procedure of generation (syntax) for the expression in order to reconstruct a linguistic meaning thus generated, the fact of its generation as an act of will is an apparent mystery. Even a person’s account of his own intentions is likely to be only a confabulation of processes he has no introspective access to. This is what Chomsky has called the “creative character” of the use of language: “it is typically innovative without bounds [and] appropriate to circumstances but not caused by them—a crucial distinction” (Chomsky 2016, p. 7). Our circumstances do not compel us to say what we say, though they may incline us thus; but what we do say is normally appropriate to the context. This inherent capacity for creativity seems to be among the defining characteristics of human intelligence, but creativity is likewise a general property of intention: though we can vaguely explain an intention to *eat* based on a feeling of hunger (although people do likewise generate the intention not to eat in the face of this feeling), we have (at present) no theoretical capacity to explain the intention to eat *tomato soup*. It is an open question whether this theoretical capacity may be forever beyond our reach.

Nevertheless, human beings are versatile at intuitively guessing at intentions. Even if we can’t explain them theoretically, our mental faculties have a remarkable capacity to construct plausible theories to explain individual actions according to assumed (that is, cognitively constructed without direct access) intention: “our tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states . . . seems to be so effortless and automatic (in a sense that we are not even conscious of engaging in any



particular act of ‘interpretation’) because our evolved cognitive architecture ‘prods’ us toward learning and practicing mind-reading” (Zunshine 2006, p. 7). There seems to be no general, context-independent capacity for us to represent mind-internally the intentions of other human beings, but we do have the capacity to do so given a particular context, given a sufficiency of data by which to circumscribe our understanding of the mental representation of human agency for which we are trying to account: “our ability to attribute states of mind to ourselves and other people is intensely context dependent” (Zunshine 2006, p. 8). It is only by “parsing the world and narrowing the scope of relevant interpretations of a given phenomenon [that] our cognitive adaptations enable us to contemplate an infinitely rich array of interpretations *within* that scope” (emphasis original, p. 14). This general faculty is often called “theory of mind,” or our capacity to construct representations (“theories”) of other minds and the features and properties of those minds, including beliefs, desires, and intentions. Although Zunshine argues that the constituent aspects of the human capacity for theory of mind are built upon an innate mental structure, the primary capacity we seem to rely on for generating a potential representation of the intentions of others is *our own* creativity: in the attempt to recover intention, we must rely on our own faculties of intention to generate plausible theories that would account for the behavior or expressions of the other person—such representations are inherently empathetic so that a person’s capacity for guessing intentions is directly proportional to their capacity for empathy. In many situations, this kind of guesswork gives readily passable results: the husband who has a long familiarity with his wife understands that she wants the window closed when she says she’s cold; in other situations, it requires us to consider and dismiss possibilities before arriving at what

we think is the best one. Sometimes we will request further information of an interlocutor, a clarification, if that is possible. Nevertheless, the generation of the array of guesses is a result of our own cognitive creativity, which, though appropriate to circumstances, is not caused by them, and hence is never reducible to any knowledge of context or environmental stimuli.<sup>1</sup>

For literary interpretation, this means that the recovery of an author's intentions is only ever guesswork, and though we might come close, we can never be certain. Most schools of literary interpretation have eschewed authorial intention as the grounding of interpretation because of its highly contextual character and have instead determined that interpreted meaning emerges, a blank slate, out of the text, relying for its content on the creativity of the reader or critic—because since the critic is always embedded in a context, and the text is always embedded in a context, leaving no one with a vantage by which to evaluate intended meaning, any meaning derived with a modicum of plausibility

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<sup>1</sup> Part of a mind-internal theory of another person's mind is a theory of the other mind's underlying knowledge or set of beliefs, which is often said to be "shared" between speaker and interpreter. However, we should be careful of saying anything is "shared" between two individuated minds: "shared" knowledge suggests that knowledge is an object standing outside of the mind out of which individuals can each select some corresponding subset or "share." What we should say instead is that the two minds possess each for themselves equivalent knowledge, and it is an assumption of equivalency, or a representation of our own knowledge modified in some equating way according to various factors, that stands in for the base of knowledge we ascribe to another person in order to help generate a theory of their mind and thus their intentions.

can be assumed to be valid. Roland Barthes (1971), developing a poststructuralist approach to the literary text, announces that “the text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination” (p. 879) so that text “asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (p. 881), allowing the reader to generate whatever interpretation seems fitting. Knapp and Michaels (1982) insist that “the [interpreted] meaning of a text is simply identical to the author’s intended meaning” (p. 724) so that there can be no “governance of interpretive practice by some larger and more principled account” (p. 737). This too frees up “interpretive practice” to the whim of the critic. Fish admits that the kind of literary-critical practice dominating today “cannot be formalized, because the conditions of its application vary with the contextual circumstances of an ongoing practice” so that a critic “begins with knowledge of the outcome he desires, and it is with such knowledge that the rule [by which he interprets a text] assumes a shape” (Fish 1985, p. 435). In this way, acts of critical interpretation of *meaning* mimic the guesswork of interpretation of *intention*, being determinable merely by the creative, often confabulatory, capacity of critics. In addition, the poststructuralist perspective has imbued literary meaning with a political character so that critics are required by the practice of the discipline to assume that the purpose of any critical interpretation is “to problematize, to disturb the settled surface of commonly received truths” (Fish 1995, p. 28). Hence, the blank slate is necessary because a literary text cannot have any verifiable interpretation, but requires instead that “a critic understands that it is his job to leave more problems (and more dissidence) than he found” (p. 29).

Unfortunately, if critics can claim anything at all about a text that their creativity

can generate, with no apparent constraints beyond those imposed by a critical-political “lens” through which they presume to look, and there are no means privileging the text over the critic by which to evaluate those claims, no apparent structure by which the meaning critics derive from texts can be guided or evaluated, then such critics are tautologically only recapitulating the very context of their critical presumptions and doing nothing at all with the texts themselves. This is what Brian Boyd (2009) calls “*a priori* conclusions” (p. 391), or interpretations derived from exclusively *confirming* textual evidence (ignoring any falsifying evidence) of an expectation the critic brings to the text. Rabinowitz (1992) observes that “one of the major problems with much current critical practice is the tendency . . . to underestimate the extent to which texts can serve as mirrors, not mirrors of the external world but mirrors of the reader, who is apt to find in a text not what is really there but rather what he or she expects or wants to find” (p. 234). Structure determines scope, which entails that an activity of meaning-making without structure has no relevant scope. Critical practice merely becomes a solipsistic reflection of haphazard, accidental, and unordered experience in the form of regurgitating the presumptions of “critical lenses.” The literary text stands forgotten: “the vexing question of where the text ends and the reader begins is made all the more difficult when dealing with readers who have been academically trained [to] transform almost any text into the particular kind of poetic utterance that he or she expects or desires it to be” (Rabinowitz 1992, p. 235).

This is unfair to critics, who certainly believe they are producing new knowledge and understanding about their presumed objects of inquiry. Unfortunately, without some theoretical system by which to evaluate the knowledge so produced, we can’t know

which is appropriate and which misses the mark. Literary critical practice, as a consequence of the anti-theory that dominates the discipline, being centered around the (often political) creative activity of the critic, becomes *expressive* of the critic's own understanding and politics and thus no longer entirely respectful of the literary *experience*. Northrop Frye (1957) warned, "to subordinate criticism to an externally derived critical attitude is to exaggerate the values in literature that can be related to the external source . . . . It is all too easy to impose on literature an extra-literary schematism" (p. 7). If we are to respect the *experience* of literature, we must step back and address the reflexive meaning of a text, the strict linguistic meaning out of which character and event arise. This will require us to examine the properties of *language* out of which the meanings of literary texts arise.

## 2 - Language as a Human Faculty of Epistemological Thought

Knapp and Michaels (and Fish) are operating on an assumption inherited from classical hermeneutics that the literary text is by nature communicative. Fish is right that any act of *communication* must entail "a speaker, with an intention and a purpose, in a situation" (p. 438). Likewise, the underlying assumption by Hirsch, Knapp, and Michaels that intentions matter at all for linguistic meaning is one supported by a widespread dogma that linguistic expression is purely communicative: "it has been conventional to regard language as a system whose function is communication" (Berwick and Chomsky 2016, p. 63), and literary texts have long been presumed to inherit this communicative property presumed of linguistic expressions. Noam Chomsky is famously iconoclastic in this respect, but nevertheless, his study of the properties of

language finds that “language design keeps to computational efficiency,” sacrificing “efficacy of use” that includes communication for this efficiency, which “suggests that language evolved for thought and interpretation: it is fundamentally a system of meaning” and “the modern doctrine that communication is somehow the ‘function’ of language is mistaken” (Berwick and Chomsky 2016, p. 101). In fact, “a traditional conception of language as an instrument of thought is more nearly correct” (p. 102).

Communication might be a property of an author’s *intention*, but it is not a property therefore of the *text*. Human beings seem to reflexively construe intentions when confronting other creatures with agency in the world, ascribing all kinds of unsubstantiable mental states to various creatures and persons, and this reflex has made us misconstrue the nature of linguistic expression to be communicative, as such expression does seem, based on this reflex, to harbor depths of intention. Yet nearly anything a human being does can communicate his or her intentions: “Language can of course be used for communication, as can any aspect of what we do: style of dress, gesture, and so on” (p. 64). If we ask what it is that people communicate when they speak, we see that inasmuch as linguistic expressions can in fact be used by individuals in particular circumstances to communicate, that which is communicated within a linguistic expression is a thought the individual has about the world, which he or she intends to share for some purpose. When the wife says, “It’s cold,” she is sharing a thought she has about the world, her observation of coldness, and her intention to suggest that the window be closed must be inferred beyond the literal thought, as discussed above. The way in which the tool of thought is often *used* does not necessarily reflect upon the nature of the tool: the fact that we use our visual system to watch T.V. should not constrain the way in

which we analyze properties of the visual system as being purposed for T.V.-watching. The same is true of language and its use according to communicative intentions.

Rather than being a tool of communication, Chomsky observes that “fundamental properties of language design indicate that a rich tradition is correct in regarding language as essentially an instrument of thought” (Chomsky 2016, p. 16). In fact, the human capacity for language seems to provide us with the capacity to think about the world, providing our ability to think about and understand things in the world. Aspects of language “provide us with a certain range of perspectives for viewing what we take to be things in the world, or what we conceive in other ways; these items are like filters or lenses, providing ways of looking at things and thinking about the products of our minds” (Chomsky 2000, p. 36). Hence, if I understand an object to be a *table*, it is because of my presumption of how the object can be used as well as the presumptions of use that I infer were once made by the designer of the object, even the mere fact of my positing a designer. Whether or not I ever actually use the object according to this presumption, the presumption is enough, despite having no physical effect on the object in the world, to cause me to understand it to be a *table*. Any person’s presumptions about how they could potentially put the flat surface of the object to use, either for setting a meal or providing a workspace or myriad other uses, imbue a *table* with its properties—but only in the mind of that person, according to his or her purposes. Nevertheless, human purposes and presumptions do not exist in the world outside of human minds: in other circumstances, the same object I now consider to be a *table*, with no physical, mind-external adjustment, might instead be construed to be a *bed* if I purposed to put down blankets and sleep upon its surface or a *shelter* if I crawled beneath it and purposed to allow the object to protect

me. None of these shifts of perspective change the essential nature of the object in the world; the only thing that changes is the perspective I take on the object, and the properties I ascribe to the object concomitant with those shifts in perspectives. Other human beings need not concur. The range of perspectives provided by the units of linguistic conception that comprise aspects of the language faculty fall within a conceptual matrix that provides “an intuitive understanding of concepts involving intending, causation, goal of action, event, and so on” (Chomsky 2000, p. 62).

Language, then, rather than being a tool of communication, is a tool of epistemological thought, and linguistic expressions are epistemological: that is, they are expressive of an attempt at making aspects of the world, including our own mental experiences, intelligible. While Knapp and Michaels or Hirsch are concerned in various ways with authorial intention for the determination of meaning in literary texts, linguistic-epistemological expression does not have an intention. Chomsky notes that “We must distinguish between the literal meaning of the linguistic expression produced by [a speaker] and what [the speaker] meant by producing this expression. . . . The first notion is the one to be explained in the theory of language. The second has nothing particular to do with language” (Chomsky 1975, p. 76). A speaker’s intentions arise as a feature of agency, not merely of language: “I can just as well ask, in the same sense of [intended] ‘meaning,’ what [a person] meant by slamming the door” (p. 76). We depart from an understanding of the nature of language or the ability to interpret linguistic-epistemological meaning when we concentrate so much on intentions that arise from the use of language as an instrument of expression: “The ‘instrumental’ analysis of language as a device for achieving some end is seriously inadequate”; rather, “In contemplation,



inquiry, normal social interchange, planning and guiding one's own actions, creative writing, honest self-expression, and numerous other activities with language, expressions are used with their strict linguistic meaning irrespective of the intentions of the 'utterer' with regard to an audience" (p. 69).

What I am calling the *linguistic-epistemological* meaning and Chomsky calls the "strict linguistic meaning" can only be determined by the capacities of mind out of which such expressions are assembled, and, as Chomsky famously argues, these linguistic capacities do not arise from context, but are genetically determined: "there is, it seems rather clear, a rich conceptual structure determined by the initial [genetically determined] state of the language faculty (perhaps drawing from the resources of other genetically determined faculties of mind), waiting to be awakened by experience" (Chomsky 2000, p. 64). Chomsky's argument for genetic determination has been called the "Poverty of the Stimulus" argument, which outlines the problem that "from the earliest stages, [a] child knows vastly more than experience has provided. This is true even of simple words" (Chomsky 2000, p. 6). Because the child acquires a capacity to which it could not have been appropriately exposed in order to explain acquisition, that is, because the relevant data in the stimulus provided by the environment is insufficient to explain the acquired, mature state of the linguistic capacity, therefore a large portion of what develops in the child's language faculty must be already present, must be innate to the child's mind prior to her encounter with data. This means there is no true *learning* as is traditionally understood of this innate knowledge, no acquisition of an extrinsic system by an unordered mind, but rather an unfurling of genetically provided knowledge that is merely awakened by the mind's experience with the world: "nature has provided us with

an innate stock of concepts, and . . . the child's task is to discover their labels" (p. 65-6).

This argument is often criticized as leading to "Extreme Nativism," or the idea that every possible contingency for conceptual items is arranged beforehand: even notions such as *carburetor* and *bureaucrat* must, according to this account, be atomistic conceptual units available for labeling as the language faculty matures. Steven Pinker (2007) argues that "word learning is as scandalous an induction problem as the acquisition of syntax or the practice of science, because there are an infinite number of generalizations, most of them wrong, that are logically consistent with any sample of experiences" (p. 96-7), insisting that there must be a tightly constrained base of conceptual atoms that allow children a strict limitation upon the potential meanings to which a label might be attached in order to grant the acquisition process any hope. However, Pinker is presuming *induction*, whereas Chomsky notes children are in fact capable of what C. S. Peirce called "abduction" based on a "guessing instinct" (qtd. in Chomsky 2006) that leads them to reach conclusions about language in their environment with great accuracy and facility.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Pinker's critique concentrates on the problem of the *process* by which children acquire understanding, rather than the knowledge that they thence demonstrate. In his critique of Pinker, Jerry Fodor (2000) points out that "Chomsky's account . . . is primarily responsive to questions about the sources and uses of knowledge, and so continues the tradition of rationalist *epistemology*."

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<sup>2</sup> We might notice that "accuracy" here is measured by its conforming to conclusions drawn by other human beings, so that if disparate human beings come to understand their experience in highly coincident ways, that coincidence is very likely to be a feature of the genetic inheritance.

Computational nativism [Pinker’s view], by contrast, is primarily about the nature of mental *processes* . . . and so continues the tradition of rationalist *psychology*” (emphasis original, p. 6). The key distinction is that the child does not need to figure out the “induction problem” because the child already *knows* the answer—this is a feature of *knowledge* provided by genetics. This is also why human children always out-perform experimental statistical-learning simulations: the simulation must either be “trained” on some extensive set of data to derive statistical generalizations, or a set of *a priori* metrics must be provided by the program, which is functionally analogous to innate knowledge. Human infants are born with the answers and do not need to be trained: for example, infants *know* what a human face is without the kind of statistical training face-recognition software requires, and no experiential “training” will overcome the innate disposition, which leads to the phenomenon of facial pareidolia by which even human adults find “false positives” in the random noise of the environment. *Face*, like *table* above, is a lens human beings can employ that provides a particular perspective on things in the world.

The lexical-conceptual framework that provides innate knowledge need not consist of some exhaustive list of discrete, atomistic concepts at all to account for acquisition: lexical items “are based on conceptual structures of a specific and closely integrated type” (Chomsky 2000, p. 62). It is the mere *structure* of the conceptual framework that provides conceptual perspective by which any word gains its meaning, so that the *scope* of potential meanings that can be labeled must be provided by this framework. The structure of the framework provides the abductive scope that makes guessing possible; as Chomsky (2016) notes, “with no limits to abduction, our cognitive capacities would also have no scope” (p. 56). Nothing like what we traditionally call

“learning” could ever possibly *add* new concepts to our native conceptual framework but can only discover some *nexus* within the already-present system in order to give it a label. I would suggest that these nexuses within the conceptual framework are what likely comprise what Chomsky, among others, call conceptual “atoms,” the lexical units that are labeled in language acquisition. *Carburetor* and *bureaucrat* must be discoverable conceptual nexuses within the framework simply because no aspect of their meaning requires augmentation of the native conceptual framework.

A paradigm of empiricist learning is often assumed in order to account for simple lexical acquisitions such as the distinction between *dog* and *cat*: surely, the argument goes, a person attaches the word to the object in the world, and the concept that the word attaches to in the mind is derived thereby and hence must be *learned* empirically based on a person’s experience of the distinctions that objects in the world have. The problem with this view is that any object at all can only be understood by the human mind according to the scope of capacity provided by the innate structure, so that the qualities by which such objects become differentiated are thus based on those qualities ascribed to the object from the structure of our innate lexical-conceptual framework: “the intuitive force of the argument for essential properties [of mind-external objects] seems to me to derive from the system of language in which the name is placed and the system of common-sense understanding, with its structure, in which the object is located” (Chomsky 1975, p. 49). Hence, *cat* picks out some particular nexus in the lexical-conceptual framework, and *dog* picks out a different nexus. Those nexuses can then be applied as “lenses” upon objects of experience in order to make the experience intelligible. Even the distinction between *cat* and my cat *Chloë* relies on conceptual

differentiations that are only possible because of innate potential provided by the framework: in this case, part of the distinction between *cat* and *Chloë* rests on the distinction between a category and an individual, which can only ever be human ascriptions to aspects of the world. We readily name my cat *Chloë* an individuated entity but do not name the entire collectivity of cats-in-the-world an individuated entity of similar kind: this is because of conceptual predispositions of knowledge provided by the framework that include an assumption (we simply *know*) that individuated *agency* determines an individuated *entity*—but even the ascription of agency upon an individual cat is the result of presumptions of the conceptual framework. The regress leads ever back to presumptions of the framework. The properties of things in the world “have to do with the structure of the systems of common-sense understanding and of language, not with essential properties of things considered in abstraction from our characterization of them in terms of these systems of categorization and representation” (p. 51). Such distinctions are not inducted from the world, but provided by the mind *a priori* of experience as an aspect of linguistic-epistemological capacity by which the world is interpreted and understood.

Much confusion arises from failure to note the distinction between innate concepts and learned labels. Berwick and Chomsky (2016) note that the “apparent fact [of] the diversity, complexity, and malleability of language” observed in the distinctions among the world’s spoken languages that has been presumed as the most prominent feature of language over the years (consider that Saussure *began* with the arbitrariness of the sign) is “mostly, maybe entirely, localized in an external system ancillary to the core processes of language structure and semantic interpretation” (p. 107), making a clear

distinction between *language* as a cognitive faculty and *speech* as the externalization of linguistic thought. Elsewhere, Berwick and Chomsky note that “the sensorimotor system [used for speech] was substantially in place long before language emerged [in human evolutionary history], and appears to have little to do with language” (p. 102); rather, the diversity of *speech* (externalized language) results from the fact that “the problem of externalization [of linguistic thought] can be solved in many different and independent ways,” suggesting that “externalization may not have evolved at all; rather it might have been a process of problem solving using existing cognitive capacities found in other animals” (p. 83).

This distinction between *language* and *speech* is fundamental to Chomsky’s conclusions about the properties of language and the human-cognitive faculty. For Chomsky, language is a mind-internal faculty, a mental process of epistemological thought by which units of the lexical-conceptual framework are deployed according to the procedures of computational syntax in order to make sense of the world. Externalization of this thought for purposes such as communication is ancillary to the mental faculty itself and employs the sensorimotor system through speech and other means. Although such externalization allows human beings to communicate their individual ascriptions of understanding about the world to one another, it is the understanding, not the communication, that is the fundamental function of language. Chomsky’s views are not universally accepted among linguists, but the Chomskyan view of language that provides explanatory principles for linguistic-epistemological meaning offers for the study of literature a theoretical foundation for literary criticism.

### 3 - A Scientific Approach to Literature

Northrop Frye (1957) points out that “Literature is not a subject of study but an object of study” (p. 11). In a similar vein, Chomsky (1977) notes, “one should not define a discipline by its procedures. It should be defined, in the first place, by the object of its investigation. Experimental or analytic procedures must be devised in order to shed light on this object” (p. 46). Hence, the first step toward a theoretical grounding for literary criticism is to recall our intended object of inquiry, *Literature*, the collectivity of literary texts, and to proceed with a theoretical paradigm that respects the nature of the object, understanding both the principles by which its properties arise and the consequences of those properties. This is a scientific perspective and can in fact be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, as Frye explains: “A theory of criticism whose principles apply to the whole of literature and account for every valid type of critical procedure is what I think Aristotle meant by poetics. Aristotle seems to me to approach poetry as a biologist would approach a system of organisms, picking out its genera and species, formulating the broad laws of literary experience, and in short writing as though he believed that there is a totally intelligible structure of knowledge attainable about poetry which is not poetry itself, or the experience of it, but poetics” (Frye 1957, p. 14). While there have been efforts, including Frye’s, at identifying the “genera and species” of literature, the “broad laws of literary experience” seem entirely unexplored, especially due to the regnant assumption that demotes literary experience beneath literary interpretation as the task of critics. Even Wolfgang Iser’s “Phenomenology” of reading is presented as a tool of interpretation rather than an explication of principles that determine the *experience* of reading. Iser’s concern is with “the message . . . transmitted . . . that the reader

‘receives’” (Iser 1980, p. 1524). Hence, the reader “is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (p. 1527). This shortcoming of literary criticism, that principles of literary experience remain unexplored, leads Chomsky (1977) to observe that “Literary criticism . . . has things to say, but it does not have explanatory principles” (p. 56). Such explanatory principles would constitute real insight into the nature of the object under inquiry.

If we want to develop a scientific theoretical paradigm for our understanding of the literary text, we must first seek to describe the object under inquiry, to ascertain the properties of those things that fall within the domain of the literary. Chomsky (1977) reminds us that the natural sciences, “at critical moments of their development, . . . have been guided by radical idealization, a concern for depth of insight and explanatory power rather than by a concern to accommodate ‘all the facts’—a notion that approaches meaninglessness” (p. 73). This idealization is necessary because theoretical paradigms are constructed around discrete phenomena of experience which must be abstracted away from the confusion of unordered context: in this way, science seeks an understanding of the underlying *principles* of nature by which complex events arise, acknowledging that a pure understanding of any complex event is likely beyond our capacity. “Phenomena that are complicated enough to be worth studying generally involve the interaction of several systems. Therefore you *must* abstract some object of study, you must eliminate those factors which are not pertinent” (p. 57). Unfortunately, there is no *a priori* guide for the kind of abstraction that will lead to insight; it is the quality of the insight that reflects



upon the quality of the abstraction: “If you obtain good results, then you have reason to believe that you are not far from a good idealization. If you obtain better results by changing your point of view, then you have improved your idealization” (p. 58). Thus, the better description we find of the literary object, the better we will be able to uncover explanatory principles. For any approach we take on literature, “the question is whether it leads to the discovery of principles that are significant”—ultimately, the goal should be “the discovery of intelligible structure and for explanatory principles” (p. 58).

The goal of science is to form explanatory theories of phenomena in the world that are intelligible to the human mind, and this capacity of theory-forming seems to be connected to the capacity for linguistic-epistemological thought provided by the language faculty. Nevertheless, we cannot treat scientific knowledge in the same way as our knowledge of the innate lexical-conceptual framework: “As understanding progresses and concepts are sharpened, the course of naturalistic inquiry tends towards theories in which terms are divested of distorting residues of common-sense understanding, and are assigned a relation to posited entities and a place in a matrix of principles” (Chomsky 2000, p. 23). Science is itself such a “matrix of principles” that are a product of what Chomsky calls the human “science-forming faculty”: “the products of the science-forming faculty are fragments of theoretical understanding, naturalistic theories of varying degrees of power and plausibility involving concepts constructed and assigned meaning in a considered and determinate fashion” (p. 22). Although Chomsky suggests that “faculties of the mind [other than the science-forming faculty] yield the concepts of common-sense understanding, which enter into natural-language semantics and belief systems” (p. 22), it seems that the science-forming faculty must be constructed upon the

epistemological capacity provided by the lexical-conceptual framework. Chomsky notes that such theories produced by this faculty diverge in their essential properties from expressions of “natural language,” and this “divergence . . . is two-fold: the constructed terms abstract from the intricate properties of natural-language expressions; [and] they are assigned semantic properties that may well not hold for natural language” so that “the divergence from natural language increases; and with it, the divergence between the ways we understand [scientific terms], on the one hand, and [natural-language concepts] on the other” (p. 24). Nevertheless, though Chomsky makes nearly no guesses about the principles that describe the operation of this science-forming faculty, it seems that it must *begin* with the lexical-conceptual framework and work to abstract concepts away from many of their various semantic relationships in order to accommodate the phenomena for which the theory is being formed. We can see this in the difference between the ordinary meaning of *observer* in natural language and the technical meaning of *observer effect* in physics, especially quantum physics: for ordinary usage, *observe* entails conscious agency, a mind that commits the act of observing. However, in physics, the technical term has abstracted away the semantic entailment of conscious agency (among other entailments), leaving only the idea of measurement: the *observer effect* in physics is merely the effect measurement has on phenomena because of the nature of instruments of measurement. In quantum physics, the effect stems from the interaction of quantum systems, and the consciousness of the human being who reads the measurement so produced has absolutely no effect on it.

Science eschews certainty because it acknowledges the anti-foundational skepticism that developed after Descartes. We know that we can have no certainty about

the nature of the world as it is in itself, but must rely on our own mental faculties to construct *models* and *theories* that attempt to both describe and explain that world. Chomsky traces the genesis of this kind of science to Newton, whose “reluctant intellectual moves set forth a new view of science in which the goal is not to seek ultimate explanations but to find the best theoretical account we can of the phenomena of experience and experiment” (Chomsky 2016, p. 89). These models and theories provide the theoretical paradigm by which our understanding of phenomena in the world can be developed through interrogation. Based on such interrogations, or based on further insights an individual may have, theoretical paradigms can be revised. “In science, it is self-evident that concepts are going to change; that is just to say that you hope to learn something. . . . If you are concerned to discover the truth . . . you are going to change your mind often. . . . When there is real progress, these changes will be significant. You come to think in a different way” (Chomsky 1977, p. 176).

Nevertheless, this development is never pre-determined: there is nothing *a priori* that science seeks to *prove*; in fact, the scientific endeavor proceeds not by *proving* theories, but by attempting to *disprove* them. Science measures its theoretical paradigm against the phenomena of experience for its adequacy in explanation, privileging, as Karl Popper famously pointed out, falsifying evidence that forces us to reconsider our suppositions: “what one looks forward to is the discovery of new phenomena that will show that the theories which have been proposed are false, that they must be changed” (Chomsky 1977, p. 179). This is the strength of science: although we know we cannot understand the world directly, we must acknowledge its objective ontology, rejecting the hypothesis of the solipsist, as Samuel Johnson did by kicking a stone. Phenomena of the

objective world<sup>3</sup> stand as an evaluation of our capacity to understand them so that the scientific endeavor develops along entwining lines of interrogation via theorizing and experimentation: theory informs experiment, and experiment informs theory. “What happens under the conditions of a scientific experiment is of no importance in itself. Its interest lies in its relation to whatever theoretical principles are at stake” (Chomsky 1977, p. 59). Likewise, there is no proper scientific *method*, no prescribed set of steps that science as a whole lays out for interrogating phenomena in the world: “The goal is to find the truth. How to do that, nobody knows. There are no procedures that can be outlined in advance for discovering scientific truth” (p. 179). Science simply pursues a *methodology* by which the ontology of the world is held up as an evaluation of the theoretical paradigm by which we attempt to understand phenomena of the world. The theoretical paradigm suggests methods by which its own system can be tested or understood against those phenomena. “What you expect of a scientist is to discover new principles, new theories, even new modes of verification” (p. 179).

Such a scientific approach to literature has the capacity to offer a theoretical paradigm of explanatory principles by which we might understand the experience of a literary text. Explanatory principles offer the kind of foundation that literary criticism

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<sup>3</sup> John Searle (1995) points out that even subjective experience can be explained by science: “we can make epistemically objective statements about entities that are ontologically subjective” (p. 8), such as the feeling of pain. This is likewise the case for the subjective experience of a literary text: I would add that there are in fact ontologically objective principles of nature that bring about such subjective experience about which scientific theorizing is likely to be productive.

has so long sought by which the knowledge produced by critics can be evaluated and sharpened, for the explication of individual texts or concerning texts overall. The Chomskyan view of language as a faculty of linguistic-epistemological thought is suggestive of just this sort of explanatory principle.

#### 4 - The Literary Experience and Linguistic-Epistemological Understanding

A literary text is composed of language, so it must be within the properties of language that explanatory principles for the experience of textual understanding will be discovered. Because language is a faculty of epistemological meaning by which human beings make sense of the world, any literary text, by its nature as a linguistic expression, must be an expression of epistemological thought that unfolds in the minds of readers a particular and planned state of *understanding*. This understanding is not reliant on communicative intentions or any other *post hoc* reflective considerations of literary meaning that we discussed above; it is simply the “surface” meaning of the text, the reflexive *experience* of linguistic-epistemological understanding. The meaning of any expression relies not merely on the meanings of the words (or lexical units) used in the expression, but also on the syntax of the expression: meanings are “syntactically individuated” (McGilvray 1998), and it is the faculty of language that reflexively decodes such meaning, providing “a semantic representation that is legible to conceptual and other systems of thought and action” (Chomsky 2000, p. 10): that is, linguistic-epistemological meaning provided by a text awakens a particular state of understanding within parts of the mind that provide the structure of our experiences.

In the case of fiction, a prototype literary text, the usual experience of reading is

one of transport, of what John Gardner calls the “fictive dream,” a state in which imagined people and events take over our conscious attention and any immediate experience of the mind-external world fades. This dream-state is guided by a text, and writers deliberately develop such texts according to this potential for generating the fictive dream to a greater or lesser degree (in cases like *metafiction*, deliberately undermining such an experience by calling attention to it). Jonathan Gottschall observes that “Human minds yield helplessly to the suction of story” (Gottschall 2012, p. 3) and “If the storyteller is skilled . . . , there is little we can do to resist” (p. 4). This *experience* of the fictive dream is a result of the nature of language, of the literary text being composed of linguistic-epistemological expression so that reading must be an act of literary-epistemological *understanding*, by which the script of the text is made meaningful by the mind’s faculty of language and concomitant cognitive faculties that play a role in establishing the properties of the lexical-conceptual framework.<sup>4</sup>

The fictive experience mimics ordinary understanding and is akin to ordinary thought because it is assembled out of the same lexical-conceptual framework by which we understand the world in ordinary day-to-day experience. We employ the same

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<sup>4</sup> Chomsky (2000) notes that the way in which other cognitive systems (things such as empathy, emotions, etc.) interact with the language faculty and the lexical-conceptual framework raise “important and obscure questions” (p. 129) about “how the conceptual resources that enter into [other] cognitive systems relate to the semantic (including lexical) resources of the language faculty” (p. 135). The connection is not known: “These are questions of fact about the architecture of the mind . . . [where] so little is understood” (p. 135).

lexical-conceptual framework provided for the understanding of human agency when we think or talk about characters in literary texts as we do when we think or talk about our real-world friends and relatives, even strangers we encounter in brief moments during the day. This produces concordance between the experience of ordinary life and the experience of fiction: fundamentally, they are the same, reliant on the same faculties of mind. In the case of ordinary life, human senses such as sight and hearing provide raw data to the epistemological faculty, one aspect of which is language, whose *purpose*, as Berwick and Chomsky (2016) point out, is “thought and interpretation” (p. 101). In the fictive or literary experience, the raw data is bypassed and the faculty of language is simply provided with a presupposed interpretation in order to generate the experience. This is why when we experience fiction in a dreamlike state, we are more-or-less unconscious of the world around us, as the faculties of thought being employed are engaged in this ongoing task and do not during that time have the capacity (or “bandwidth”) to acknowledge and generate understanding for other aspects of the world provided by the senses (equally, unguided, introspective employment of these faculties can lead to our being “lost in thought”). It is also why readers and critics relentlessly talk about fictional characters and events as if they were real people and things that actually happened. Within our understanding, a character has as much presumed agency, emotion, and freedom of choice as any human being we otherwise encounter.

As language is a cognitive faculty, and literary understanding relies on the properties of this faculty, any discipline of knowledge constructed around literary texts as an object of inquiry must be a cognitive science. Analysis of the cognitive principles that explain the fictive dream can be generalized as principles that provide an explanatory

foundation based on Chomsky's insights about the nature of the human language faculty and the epistemological capacity provided by the lexical-conceptual framework. Hence, though any reading of a text is ephemeral and extemporaneous, the context-dependent result of cognitive faculties, it must be reliant upon a set of innate faculties and innate conceptual structures provided by the human genetic endowment so that any two readings will share a large portion of their consequent structure and properties in common.

Characters will be understood in similar ways; events will be known to have happened in a particular order and have particular structural properties such as cause and effect that must be identical among all readings. Such reflexive, linguistic-epistemological understanding of the literary text becomes an object of contemplation for the mind of the reader for which reflective interpretations might be generated. The cognitive perspective on the literary text easily provides explanatory principles for the way in which human beings experience literature and is hence a scientific perspective as well.

##### 5 - The Relationship of Cognitive Approaches to Literature to Current Criticism

The cognitive-scientific perspective has already begun to overthrow the behaviorism and empiricism that treated contextual stimuli as primarily causative of behavior, rather than daring to enter into the "black box" of the mind for serious inquiry. But even those who recognize that a cognitive approach to literature should be a fruitful and revealing stance have their disagreements. F. Elizabeth Hart (2001) finds a conflict between what she calls the "cognitive" and the "cognitive-evolutionary" positions that each in their own way attempt to find a cognitive approach to literature. Whereas the "cognitive" group has been able to find some common ground with the postmodern



empiricism dominating recent literary criticism, the “cognitive-evolutionary” group, which adheres to a far more scientific perspective, often sets its own project directly against that of the old guard. Brian Boyd, whom Hart would likely shelve into her “cognitive-evolutionary” group, in a reply to an MLA presentation by one among this “old guard” who claimed that “the profession could use some younger people who think the grownups have got it all wrong” (Menand 2005, p. 12), points out that certain assumptions are nevertheless sacrosanct: “he [Menand] rules out anyone challenging the position in which he and his generation have entrenched themselves. For they are certain there is at least one thing that just *cannot* be wrong: that the sciences, especially the life sciences, have no place in the study of the human world” (Boyd 2006b, p. 19).

Much of Boyd’s cognitive-evolutionary criticism makes the case that “humans are not just cultural or textual phenomena but something more complex” (Boyd 2006b, p. 19), seeking to *replace* current criticism with an evolutionary paradigm. Lisa Zunshine, who has made a career using a cognitive approach that privileges “Theory of Mind” as a meaning-making cognitive phenomenon, thinks otherwise, saying that the best cognitive approach to literature is that approach which slots in nicely with the critical tradition. Like Hart, she makes a distinction between “two different views of the future of cognitive literary studies” (Zunshine and Boyd 2007, p. 193), what I would name an *appositional* and an *oppositional* position. The appositional is Zunshine’s preference, one in which “cognitive approaches may ultimately provide literary critics with one more tool—or a system of tools—for literary study, *adding* to the existing critical vocabulary instead of displacing it” (emphasis original, p. 194), whereas Zunshine’s characterization of an oppositional stance is that “the introduction of cognitive analysis must radically change

our current interpretive practices, either uprooting existing theoretical approaches or, at the very least, ensuring that each of them is acceptable in so far as it toes the line of the relevant area of research in cognitive science” (p. 194). Zunshine believes “the field of cognitive approaches to literature has now split into two fields, whose respective visions of interdisciplinarity are profoundly different” (p. 194). Boyd answers, nevertheless, that a cognitive approach must take a lesson from science: because “literary scholarship has long been vitiated by . . . the naïve assumption that evidence *for* a position suffices,” it “most urgently needs to learn from scientific method [to] consider the evidence *against* [an] interpretation” (p. 198). If evidence for a position is all that is required, then evidentiary selectivity (cherry-picking) is sufficient in establishing any position at all without regard to how it interacts with other positions, and nothing could ever disprove something already established. On the other hand, if we do acknowledge that it is possible for some positions to simply be contradictory, then evidence is widely available to help falsify a large number of critical assumptions and theoretical underpinnings.

In his critique of Menand, Boyd does just that, establishing reasons two of the pillars of postmodern literary-critical theory can be falsified: the “two fundamental principles [of] first, *anti-foundationalism*, the idea that there is no secure basis for knowledge; and, second, *difference*, the idea that any universal claims or attempts to discuss universal features of human nature are instead merely the product of local standards, often serving the vested interests of the status quo, . . . should be critiqued, dismantled, overturned” (Boyd 2006b, p. 20). Boyd critiques these ideas from the point of view of evolutionary science, pointing out that the roots of scientific anti-foundationalism are far older and more robust than that of the anti-foundationalist

epistemology that dominates postmodern literary theory, but that the resultant skepticism does not in fact undermine the *possibility* of knowledge, but rather outlines the very processes that make human knowledge eminently possible, similar to epistemological view outlined above. Likewise, the cognitive perspective is based on a surfeit of evidence that human beings are genetically similar, that we are all in fact of a single species and hence have similar capacities. Postmodern theory would privilege differences while denying commonalities, or attributing any claims of commonality to some dominating impulse, apparently ignoring, as Boyd points out, that difference can be used in just the same way, as an examination of the excuses made for any genocide will demonstrate. “To reject claims of a common human nature, far from securing the moral high ground, is to undermine the grounds for treating other human beings as equals” (Boyd 2006b, p. 27).

Hence, Boyd deliberately seeks within the contradictions between a cognitive-evolutionary perspective and the regnant postmodern perspective to falsify the dominant paradigm of literary-critical practice and thereby to offer a replacement. Although Zunshine is “committed to the difference between informed speculation and ‘anything goes’ relativism,” acknowledging that postmodern theory has led some critics to a sense of entitled interpretive freedom, able to claim anything at all at their whim, she is nonetheless “not interested in overturning the value that literary study puts upon multiplicity, interpretive choice, [and] the ability to live with more than one valid answer to the same question” (Zunshine and Boyd 2007, p. 194). This commitment seems, though possibly salvageable, to ultimately stand in spite of countervailing evidence that Boyd points out Zunshine refuses to acknowledge (Boyd 2006a; Zunshine and Boyd

2007).

Zunshine relies for part of her position on the work of Ellen Spolsky (2002), who tries to explicitly connect a cognitive-evolutionary literary theory with the post-structuralism of Jacques Derrida through a critique of the human capacity for representation. For the most part, Spolsky's analysis analogizes Darwinian considerations of the mechanisms of evolution by natural selection with mechanisms of ambiguity and linguistic "instability" presupposed from the structuralist analysis of language. She sees linguistic "flexibility" and innovation as analogous to evolutionary forces of mutation and selection that make adaptive innovation possible. This is a strange assertion, but one that is common in literary criticism of the latter part of the twentieth century that sees the process of "Theorizing" to be simply one of analogizing conceptual systems of explanation onto alternate phenomena without acknowledging falsifying evidence or contradictory features. Hence Spolsky concludes that she sees "the value of Darwin's theory as a description and not as an explanation of change, adaptation, and recategorization [and] on these grounds it is attractive to literary theory because the processes it hypothesizes for the natural world . . . are consistent with many of the most interesting recent theories of mind, knowledge, meaning, and interpretation" (p. 57). However, Spolsky is operating under the Saussurean description of language as a system of meaning reliant on "the relationships between words [rather than] the words themselves" and "the destabilizing implications for the study of just about everything" (p. 50). Unfortunately, the structuralist and post-structuralist empiricist accounts of language and meaning that derive from Saussure can in fact be falsified by evidence that helps to replace it with Chomsky's rationalist paradigm, and meaning is in fact contingent not on

the social structure into which one is born, or the relationships between referents that one must unaccountably “learn” (inscribed as unordered data on a “blank slate” and empty mind according to the structuralist presumption), but on the genetic inheritance of innate knowledge by which one’s acquisitional scope is granted. Spolsky and Zunshine can pursue E. O. Wilson’s dreams of “consilience” between the sciences and the humanities because they do not recognize this disjunction in the conceptualization of the nature of *language* by which representations of the world are made possible. A person’s linguistic-epistemological capacity simply does not arise out of the environment, but is provided in both its structure and scope by genetics at birth. This, fundamentally, falsifies and undermines the postmodern position.

Although Zunshine recognizes the innate foundations of “Theory of Mind” out of which she constructs her literary criticism, she does not explore the features or nature of the language faculty by which any theory of mind in fiction is even made possible by the cognitive object produced by linguistic-epistemological meaning. This is likely because she accepts as accurate the poststructuralist conception of language in literary criticism and she understands her project to be “far from rendering the traditional approaches redundant, [but rather, that] a cognitive approach can build on, strengthen, and develop their insights” (Zunshine 2006, p. 37). Zunshine’s literary criticism does not engage with language as the medium of fictive representation for the minds which her Theory of Mind analyzes. In fact, Zunshine reduces the experience of fiction to merely that of “engag[ing] our ToM [Theory of Mind]” (p. 164), ignoring the many concomitant faculties of mind by which such a thing is made possible in the first place. Boyd is critical of Zunshine’s approach, saying her “explicit claim seems unlikely” and “the

examples she does draw on fail to provide the support she thinks they do” (Boyd 2006b, p. 591), but Boyd likewise eschews linguistic analysis in his own evolutionary criticism (Boyd 2009), concentrating on representations of character and plot rather than the language that brings about such representations in the mind because he believes “narrative does not depend on language” (p. 130) and “even without language humans share an ability to understand and represent events in complex ways” (p. 131). Boyd acknowledges that “stories employ words and conventions,” but insists that “when we engage with stories, our response does not restrict itself to the medium of presentation or to a kind of inner verbal retranscription. Rather we create on the fly a mental world that we keep track of by experiencing it through semisimulation” (p. 157). Boyd insists that various cognitive capacities, such as “our capacities to comprehend events and to recall and reconfigure them in memory develop in us naturally, and to a considerable extent without language” (p. 158).

However, this discounting of language seems to arise from a limited view of what language actually is. Boyd seems to understand language to be more-or-less synonymous with speech, and the evidence he points to of children developing cognitive capacities prior to *spoken* language are merely capacities that can be interrogated experimentally through behavior long before linguistic externalization is available. Hence, infants as young as four months already show signs of distinguishing conceptually between animate and inanimate objects, even though they cannot yet use this knowledge in speech. Nevertheless, this capacity of categorization seems to be inherently connected with the lexical-conceptual framework that underlies the conceptual units of the language faculty properly understood. Boyd wants to undermine a postmodern critical approach that

refuses to acknowledge its weaknesses, and, possibly because this approach was founded on a particular understanding of the nature of language, Boyd tries to minimize the import of language in literary matters, promoting instead the mental faculties that, according to his approach, are somehow engendered by literature irrespective of language.

Additionally, Boyd's considerations are understandable, even if mistaken, as literary critics who are interested in finding a cognitive approach to literature readily turn to cognitive scientists, philosophers, and psycholinguists for guidance in how to consider matters of cognition. But even among these, the distinction Chomsky makes about the nature of language seems often to sow confusion. Daniel Dennett (1995) relates the story of a conference at which the evolution of the language capacity in human beings was discussed. Although Chomsky was not able to attend, Dennett and other participants were baffled by the position Chomsky's supporters took on Chomsky's behalf. Among those "most amazing objections" made by Chomsky's supporters and collected by Steven Pinker was "Language is not designed for communication at all" (p. 392). Even a distinguished philosopher like Dennett with no connections to the postmodern project of literary criticism and a renowned psycholinguist like Steven Pinker who has written again and again *against* the postmodern literary project and its adherence to the "Blank Slate" on which experience inscribes its leavings in favor of rationalism, both think that the observation that language is not designed for communication to be a "bizarre conviction" (p. 392). Many literary scholars, adopting a cognitive approach, turn to linguistics like George Lakoff, whose approach in linguistics has somehow won the title of "cognitive" but nevertheless shares the problems of empiricism and communicative intention outlined

above.

Many of these scholars (in various cases overtly and in others more-or-less tacitly) consider *language* to be purely a faculty by which thought is externalized, a mental procedure by which some kind of “Mentalese” or *lingua mentis* is *translated* into speech for the purpose of communication rather than being itself the primary driver of epistemological thought for which externalization is merely an ancillary process. This is what makes Boyd believe that aspects of some kind of Mentalese develop in children (and the species) prior to this kind of communicative, externalist language. Although a simple glance at Occam’s principle of parsimony should demonstrate why this hypothesis is needless, the empirical facts of the matter do not bear it out. In Chomsky’s paradigm, although the units of the lexical-conceptual framework *may* in some way be provided by or shared with other mental faculties (such as the visual system), the language faculty (considered as a computational module) assembles those units into a structured pattern by innate computational processes (what Chomsky calls “Merge”) and hence provides structured “output” for both internal reflection and for externalization through the sensorimotor system, the latter of which leads (when necessary) to the articulation of speech. Hence, all the sound and fury leveled at the vast diversity of linguistic externalization by which communication is achieved signifies no consequences for the fundamental epistemological nature of language as a mode of thought. The fact that language is a tool of epistemological thought is, I think, not only a key to the Chomskyan theoretical paradigm, but an inescapable consequence of the simple deductions arising from Chomsky’s foundational observations of the properties of language. As such, it is intrinsic to any cognitive approach to literature.



Although fiction does, as Zunshine and Boyd surmise, employ mental capacities such as Theory of Mind as part of its phenomenal experience, it does this as a feature of epistemological thought engendered by language: for example, a preponderance of verbs require assigning mental states to the agent or patient of the action (consider *persuade*, *watch*, or even *look* or *see*). Hence, the nature of language and the mind that the scientific theoretical paradigm pursued in this *essai* has outlined means that a cognitive approach to literature simply cannot be oppositional to postmodern literary-critical practice, but must oppose many of its foundational assumptions. This oppositional position requires us to reject many of the theoretical conclusions derived from those “giants of antifoundationalism” who decreed that “it’s interpretation all the way down” (Menand 2005, p. 11) and replace them with consequences arising from the nature of language as a tool of epistemological thought built upon an innate lexical-conceptual framework and syntax. Likewise, many critical “readings” that depend upon the assumptions of such postmodern theory will necessarily be incoherent within the cognitive paradigm, although some will not.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, cognitive approaches such as Zunshine’s and Boyd’s must

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<sup>5</sup> This is analogous to analyses of physical objects made in Newtonian terms at the time of Einstein’s paradigm-shifting revolution. For some analyses, for example, that of the orbit of the Earth around the Sun, the Newtonian perspective was *good enough*; however, analyses such as those of the orbit of Mercury around the Sun (which had always failed in the Newtonian paradigm to accurately represent Mercury’s unexplained perturbations) could be dismissed and replaced with a far more robust analysis based in the new paradigm.

acknowledge the role of language as a clear and foundational part of the account: language is not merely an invisible medium through which a human *lingua mentis* is communicated or expressed; language, as itself the medium of epistemological thought, is intrinsic in *creating* knowledge and understanding, and the nuances of linguistic thought and its representation on the page that ravel for us the fictive dream should comprise major aspects of the object of inquiry for any literary-theoretical or -critical endeavor. In order to achieve descriptive and explanatory adequacy, literary-critical practice must be capable of showing how a literary text awakens understanding in the mind as well as explaining the principles that make such a thing possible. These principles will further inform such additional interpretive or meaning-making analysis that can be enacted upon the cognitive literary text. Nevertheless, because linguistic meaning is rooted in both the conceptual units and the syntactic computations by which the language faculty works, providing an innate structure that defines the scope of potential human understanding, a literary text that employs such processes in order to create effects must be approached as a linguistic, epistemological object.

## PART TWO: PRINCIPLES OF LITERARY EXPERIENCE

The experience of literature arises as a function of the nature of language as a faculty of epistemological thought so that a literary text engenders in the minds of readers a particular and planned experience of understanding based on an innate lexical-conceptual framework. As discussed in Part One, literary understanding engages what Noam Chomsky calls the “intentional-conceptual systems” of the mind via the interpretive faculty of language, wherein the text provides the linguistic-epistemological content that governs the experience. In pursuit of a scientific methodology, this most basic explanatory principle of the literary experience provides a foundation by which a theoretical paradigm for further explanatory principles of the literary experience can be pursued. Part Two will offer a few such principles, concentrating on fictional texts as an idealized prototype literary text.<sup>6</sup>

### 1 - “Literary Belief”

Of all genres of fiction, the Fantasy is the most detached from the world of ordinary experience and the things in that world. On the pages of Fantasies, readers discover entirely invented worlds governed by logics of their own and peopled by imagined creatures that create non-human, alien societies. Such stories strain our epistemological capacity, divorcing our understanding as much as possible from the

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<sup>6</sup> Recall the argument in Part One concerning a scientific pursuit of idealized abstractions.

world of ordinary experience. Nevertheless, such fictions are widely popular and have been successful across many centuries and cultures. Homer's *Odyssey* contains fantastic elements, and those remain as gripping now as they were when Homer originally recited the epic nearly three thousand years ago. Readers can easily slip into such fictions, and the "Fictive Dream" so produced has no less power for being so removed from the experience of realistic fiction or reality itself.

The contemporary genre of Fantasy Fiction is very often traced through the remarkable success of J. R. R. Tolkien's novel, *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's novel stands as one of the great accomplishments of the Twentieth Century. It emerged out of a generation that was, according to many critics, supposed to have been scarred by the Great War of 1914-18 into being ironically detached, no longer capable of truly believing in human kind as an honorable species capable of great virtue. Nevertheless, Tolkien gave us a masterpiece in which he did not treat virtue with sneering scorn, but relished and embraced all that was good and noble about humanity (Garth 2003). The novel resonated with audiences, making *The Lord of the Rings* one of the most popular books ever written and achieving for Tolkien the position, according to surveys, of "Author of the Century" (Shippey 2000). Due to its enormous success, it has also been viewed as the progenitor of a marketable genre of Fantasy Fiction, serving as a template and guide that many authors used for their own Fantasies.<sup>7</sup> Tolkien did not himself truly invent the

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<sup>7</sup> Two bestselling authors who helped, in 1977, inaugurate Del Rey, an imprint of Ballantine Books that was one of the first enormously successful specialists in Fantasy and Science Fiction, were Terry Brooks, whose *Sword of Shannara* follows nearly verbatim the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Stephen R. Donaldson, who has over

genre, as he was working in a well-established tradition, but he did alter the focus of the tradition and offer it mainstream credibility (that is, the capacity to make serious money for publishers). Nevertheless, what many readers of Tolkien's work cite as its overriding appeal is the fact that he was able to so thoroughly create for readers an alternate world peopled by non-human societies replete with myth, legend, and history that together make that world seem so real and complete.

Tolkien understood what he had done in developing an alternate world through his literary work as "sub-creation," creating for the reader not Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," but what Tolkien called "literary belief" (Tolkien 1939). Tolkien considered that the "suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying . . . to find what virtue we can in a work of an art that has for us failed" (Tolkien 1939, p. 132). For Tolkien, *literary belief* is much more profound than a ruse we choose to play upon ourselves: it is an entering into, wholeheartedly, the Fictive Dream a literary work is capable of awakening in our minds: "the story-maker . . . makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed" (p. 132). This is why John Gardner (1983a) warns that "one of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader's mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream" (p. 31-2). It is when the fictive dream is all-encompassing, when it engages without baffling or burdening our linguistic-

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the years pointed to Tolkien as the very reason he pursued the kind of storytelling that he did.

epistemological capacity, that we achieve Tolkien's "literary belief," the conceptual acceptance of a coherent set of linguistic-epistemological propositions.

The world created by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* is a purely literary creation, a cognitive literary object that accomplishes the task of being so detailed and wide-ranging in its detail that we nearly forget it is *not* real. This means we need not rely on any understanding we have of the world in which Tolkien lived in order to believe it as a literary creation. Tolkien (1936) similarly said of *Beowulf* that it is "not an actual picture of historic Denmark or Geatland or Sweden about A.D. 500" (p. 27), suggesting that those critics who looked to the poem for historical artifacts were approaching it with inappropriate expectations of historical veracity: rather, the poem is "a self-consistent picture, a construction bearing clearly the marks of design and thought [whose purpose is] creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep significance" (p. 27). Tolkien suggests that for *Beowulf* (and by extension literary work in general), "it is the mood of the author, the essential cast of his imaginative apprehension of the world" (p. 20) that should engage the interest of critics. This perspective is precisely the literary text understood as linguistic-epistemological object, an "imaginative apprehension of [a] world" given literary form by an author.

Any fictional text, even non-Fantasies, serve to create Tolkien's literary belief. Even a meta-fiction that undermines such belief relies on our belief in that capacity for undermining. As Tolkien suggests, we cannot simply engage, as Coleridge posits, a "willing suspension of disbelief": rather, we must *believe* the epistemological propositions that comprise any text because to doubt them is to disengage with the

literary experience, to, in some sense, reject the project of literature. This principle of belief, of the acceptance of the literary experience, is a result of the nature of language as an epistemological faculty: because expressions offer an *understanding* of the world, such understanding must either be believed or disbelieved—for the most part, the fictive dream is successful because such propositions are reflexively believed.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 - The Perceptive Experience of the Fictive Dream

Much literary and fictional writing is often implicated in some kind of *visual* thought. For example, John Gardner’s advice to writers is to “make the scene vivid in the reader’s mind,” to “take pains to avoid anything that might distract the reader from the image” because the fictive dream runs “like a movie in the reader’s mind” (Gardner 1983a, p. 32). However, this experience of a “movie” or of visual imagery is in large part an illusion.

The illusion seems to arise from “a widely held belief among psychologists . . . that there are two distinct forms of thought: verbal and pictorial” (Fodor and Pylyshyn 2015, p. 21 and again on p. 23). Although we describe “seeing” the action of the fictive dream, Fodor and Pylyshyn insist that “it’s . . . hard to take literally the idea that introspecting a mental image is a kind of seeing” because “mental images can’t literally be *seen* any more than they can literally be *touched*” (emphasis original, p. 31). In fact, “the apparent ‘perception’ of a mental image lacks most of the signature properties of visual perception” (p. 32). Any literary figure, be it metaphor or evocative description, is

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of example in this *essai* below, I will be using a handful of passages from the opening pages of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

based on language and the properties thereof, not the properties of images or perception, unless the text contains literal pictures (e.g. photographs). In fact, “the expressive capacity of ‘discursive’ representation much exceeds that of ‘iconic’ representation, as does the expressive power of thought” (p. 26-7) because “mental representations corresponding to perceptions and beliefs must both have a kind of semantics that images do not have” (p. 26). *Meaning*, the evocative aspect of language that creates the fictive dream, is much more fecund than pure image. Fodor and Pylyshyn give the following example: “Draw a picture that shows a black swan. Now draw a picture that shows all swans are white. Now draw a picture that shows these two pictures to be incompatible. It can’t be done; compatibility isn’t a kind of relation that pictures can express” (p. 26). In fact, the lexical-conceptual framework, as a framework for epistemological thought, is fundamentally based on such relationships that are inexpressible in pure imagery: “Concepts don’t work like images” (p. 25). Likewise, images cannot be structured by syntax, but units of the lexical-conceptual framework can be; this is the principal functioning of the language faculty as a tool of thought for human beings.

We can see this very clearly in the first sentence of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* where the reader is first invited into the fictive dream:

*When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.* (p. 21)

No constituent part of the sentence creates a specific, concrete image. What does *When Mr. Bilbo Baggins . . . announced* look like? How can we visually imagine the concept of *when*? What does *he would be celebrating his birthday with a party of special*



*magnificence* look like? How would we visualize *much talk and excitement in Hobbiton*? Although we might dimly reference some vague images were we forced to provide them, they would be incapable of containing the surfeit of semantic features that the sentence itself contains. The old saw that *a picture is worth a thousand words* has it backward: even so simple a word like *party* is capable of generating myriad images, none of which are capable of expressing the complex entailments and properties of the conceptual package contained by this single word of English: we might instead, more rightly, say that *a word is worth ten thousand pictures*.

Tolkien's created world has been often described as being extremely vivid, and many passages are what we would call *descriptive*, language that is traditionally understood to be imagistically evocative. We can examine a scene-setting sentence a few pages on for such imagistic properties. The sentence seems at first glance to provide such a vivid image:

*Inside Bag End, Bilbo and Gandalf were sitting at the open window of a small room looking out west on to the garden.*

At first pass, it seems to suggest something that we might capture in a painting, or at least a rough sketch. According to traditional ideas about prose and the advice given to writers, this sentence is apparently *concrete*, hence suggesting imagery. Nevertheless, there are relationships here that could not be explicated concretely in any image. For example, how does an image show that they were *looking out west*? How would it show that the two characters are *sitting at a window* while *looking out* and yet are *inside* the home? Such an apparent image contains quite a bit of relational information that would be difficult to express coherently and specifically in an image. There's no denying that

there are an infinite number of ways of *attempting* to capture such relations in an image, but the words do not concretely establish any single image for our imagination, because images do not have the capacity to express such relations, which are an aspect of our lexical-conceptual framework, deployed as part of our epistemological-interpretive faculty. *Bag End* is Bilbo's house, and a "house is conceived as an exterior surface and an interior space (with complex properties)" (Chomsky 2000, p. 36). For example, "If I see the house, I see its exterior surface; seeing the interior surface does not suffice" (p. 35). Similarly, someone *inside* a house is not *near* the house, while someone *outside* it can be said to be *near* (or *far*)—such facts "seem to be a language universal, holding of 'container' words of a broad category, including ones we might invent: . . . to paint a spherical cube brown is to give it a brown exterior" (p. 35). These properties are imposed upon the objects that we interpret in the world, including images of such objects—they are never properties of objects *an sich*. Hence, we might *interpret* a visual illustration of a scene as expressing some version of these relations, but this must be an *ascription* of linguistic-epistemological meaning upon the depiction, not a feature of the image itself. Likewise, even though it *feels* as if we can *see* such imagery in our minds when we read, the complex relations that are expressed in language only exist abstractly as part of the lexical-conceptual framework deployed for understanding the literary text, not as a property of visual imagining. The concept of *concreteness* does not seem to apply to linguistic-epistemological expression.

The idea that the Fictive Dream is not like a movie in the mind, composed of moving images, seems counterintuitive, or at least contrary to what many people report as being their experience of reading. Many authors likewise report watching a movie in

their mind and writing down what they see in an attempt to express this movie to their readers. Nevertheless, we can see by the nature of language as a tool of epistemological thought that what the authors are actually expressing, if their reported experience is accurate, is an imposed *understanding* of the images they might be seeing (though it's likely this report is a misapprehension of the experience). In any case, readers, though they might report similar things, of viewing a fictive "movie," seem also to be participating in an illusion. The innate aspects of the lexical-conceptual framework and syntax of the language faculty are so fundamental to the way human beings understand the world that we are very often unaware of the way in which it shapes and determines our experience. We do not recognize ascriptions but instead assume that the features we ascribe to phenomena are instead intrinsic properties of those phenomena. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the properties of the fictive dream that arise from principles of linguistic-epistemological understanding.

### 3 - Ascriptive Intention

Because all text is reliant on language, and language is a tool of epistemological thought, any written text, be it the script of a drama, a poem, epic, fictional story, piece of journalism, biography, or any linguistic text at all, will generate in the mind of the reader an epistemological object based on innate capacities of linguistic-epistemological thought. Although we often posit the requirement of an object on which the faculty of understanding must work (we expect to ascribe our understanding to objects in the world; e.g. an understanding *of x*), the understanding produced by the literary text does not have such an object. Whereas many semantic theories of language have been developed

around the notion that words have some kind of inherent referential property that ties them to objects in the world, Chomsky's cognitive paradigm shows that this kind of reference is only ever a human choice, a *use* of the language faculty by which we attempt to understand the world. Chomsky finds that there is no "coherent notion of 'reference' . . . holding between linguistic expressions and things . . . though people do use these expressions (in various ways) to refer to things, adopting the perspectives that these expressions provide" (Chomsky 2000, p. 41). Because "the semantic properties of words are used to think and talk about the world in terms of the perspectives made available by the resources of the mind" (p. 16), there is no intrinsic connection between the expression and the world, but "what we take as objects, how we refer to them and describe them, and the array of properties with which we invest them, depend on their place in the matrix of human actions, interests and intent" (p. 21) provided by the lexical-conceptual framework and the language faculty. Although the term "reference" has a long history in the study of semantics, the property it describes does not seem to exist as is traditionally understood: as Chomsky notes, words do not refer to things; people *use* words to refer to things. Hence, when a person generates an expression for some contextual use, the expression is accompanied by a property that I would name *ascriptive intention*: As an epistemological proposition, a linguistic expression *in context* has the potential to be ascribed to some contextual circumstance, according to some use-generated intention. Ascriptive intention must be a property of a person's *intentions*, however, as distinct from linguistic-epistemological *meaning*, for the reasons Chomsky notes that there is no property of *reference* as traditionally understood as a connection of meaning between word and world.

Because a literary text is not an enactment of communicative intention, as discussed in Part One, it has only the properties of a linguistic-epistemological expression and therefore no inherent ascriptive intentions. Although in some cases, such as in biographies or histories, a literary text may *suggest* such connections to text-external objects, a fundamental property of any literary text is that it does not in fact have any intrinsic or *necessary* connection to the text-external world. Any ascriptive intentions generated by a reading will necessarily be a product of the *reader's intentions* for his or her own contextual reading, irrespective of the strict linguistic-epistemological meaning of the text. For instance, although the subject of a biography, for example, *Richard Nixon*, seems to be an object in the text-external world, any reading of the text creates only in the reader's mind a linguistic-epistemological understanding for a literary *character* under the title of *Nixon*: "*Nixon* is a personal name, offering a way of referring to Nixon *as a person*; it has no metaphysical significance" (Chomsky 2000, p. 42): By any use of the name, "we need not suppose that an essential property is assigned to an individual, Nixon, apart from the way he is named or the category of common-sense understanding to which he is assigned" (Chomsky 1975, p. 47). The extended epistemological proposition that a biography of *Nixon* would develop constructs a self-sufficient understanding of some imagined human being under the label "Nixon": we need not ascribe this understanding to any other human being we might encounter or have extra-textual knowledge of, even one also named Nixon. Although we often do so without reflection, this does not entail that we must. We could read the Nixon biography as if it were fiction and "Nixon" an invention of the author (which, to some large degree, it is): "ascription of identity is a construction of the imagination" (Chomsky 2016, p. 51).

It is not the text that grants ascriptive intentions over any aspect of the world, but we as readers who presume such intentions based on various factors, including textual genre. Variation in the presumption of ascriptive intention is in fact the cultural determinant for certain aspects of literary genre, despite the fact that literary texts of any genre share an epistemological nature, having no *intrinsic* connections with the world: for example, the fuzzy distinction between *fiction* and *non-fiction* relies on this continuum of presumptions of ascriptive intention. We give newspaper articles very broad ascriptive intention for real-world objects and events but expect histories and biographies to be semi-inventive storytelling with some smaller degree of ascriptive intention. Those based-on-a-true-story explorations in texts like Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* contrast only marginally with our expectations that works of *fiction* that nevertheless depict apparently real-world places or people conform to the knowledge we may have already accumulated and ascribe to those places and people, such as our expectations that a fiction *about* New York City match up with our knowledge of what we take to be the real-world city—but even here we can be quite forgiving of a mismatch, allowing the fictional city characteristics we do not necessarily ascribe to our understanding of the real-world city. On the other hand, stories with fantastical elements such as ghost stories, tales of alien creatures, and works that feature gods, dragons, and supernatural creatures, such as Fantasy Fiction like Tolkien's, demand even less ascriptive intention. Nevertheless, ascriptive intention for any text at all is only ever a contextual property generated by a reader's intentions under the influence of genre conventions, not by the linguistic-epistemological propositions that comprise the text itself.

#### 4 - The Nature of Cultural Knowledge

There is a tension here between what I am calling *ascriptive intention* and a person's *knowledge* of the world. In fact, the regnant dogma within literary criticism is based on this tension: the assumption is that prior knowledge determines meanings and our capacity for understanding. Stanley Fish summarizes, calling *knowledge* a set of *beliefs*<sup>9</sup>: "a belief is a prerequisite for being conscious at all. Beliefs are not what you think *about* but what you think *with*"; such knowledge can consist of "the identity of persons, the existence of animate and inanimate entities, the stability of objects, in addition to the countless beliefs that underwrite the possibility of and intelligibility of events" (Fish 1985, p. 443). But Fish is making two errors here. The first is an assumption of the incoherent notion of "reference" as discussed above by which he assumes words attach to things in the world, and the second is an adherence to the epistemological empiricism of his tradition that considers all knowledge to be constituted by social structures within a "situated subject [human mind] . . . who is always constrained by the local or community standards and criteria of which his judgment is an extension" (p. 440).

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<sup>9</sup> *Knowledge* is often considered in philosophical inquiry to be related to *true belief*, and the distinction is normally associated with properties of *truth*. Fish's tradition claims to undermine the concept of *truth*, thus undermining *knowledge* and leaving only *beliefs*, while I think that my analysis of truth below dispels the distinction, making *knowledge* and *beliefs* the same thing, at least for the terms of the current *essai*. In any case, Chomsky notes, "most languages . . . do not have terms corresponding to the English 'belief'" (Chomsky 2000, p. 119).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, an immense portion of our knowledge is innate, provided by our genetic endowment and the features of the lexical-conceptual framework out of which epistemological capacity is given its scope. Much of what Fish cites as “beliefs” in the above quote are in fact aspects of semantic *meaning* that derive from the nature of understanding provided by the lexical-conceptual framework. Chomsky explains, “Alongside of the language faculty and interacting with it in the most intimate way is the faculty of mind that constructs what we might call ‘commonsense understanding,’ a system of beliefs, expectations, and knowledge concerning the nature and behavior of objects, their place in a system of ‘natural kinds,’ the organization of these categories, and the properties that determine the categorization of objects and the analysis of events,” including “principles that bear on the place and role of people in a social world, the nature and conditions of work, the structure of human action, will and choice, and so on” (Chomsky 1975, p. 35). Hence, much of what we might call *belief* or *knowledge* is in fact an aspect of language, and “the *a priori* framework of human thought, within which language is acquired, provides necessary connections among concepts, reflected in connections of meaning among words and, more broadly, among expressions involving these words” (Chomsky 2000, p. 62-3): these “necessary connections” become presumed as *knowledge* because “these systems may be unconscious for the most part and even beyond the reach of conscious introspection” (Chomsky 1975, p. 35). Knowledge, then, has “a rather clear distinction between truths of meaning and truths of fact” (Chomsky 2000, p. 62). In this way, *ascriptive intention* determines the ascription of *meaning* to aspects of the world as an extemporaneous feature of intention in the production or interpretation of a linguistic-epistemological



expression, while *knowledge* is a set of *facts* about the world in the form of linguistic-epistemological *propositions* that have been evaluated as *true* based on such presumed *ascriptive intentions*. Together these comprise what Fish calls “community standards” or a cultural context, but they are constructed by an individual from an innate, genetically determined lexical-conceptual framework.

A significant portion of *knowledge*, according to this analysis, is based on the concept of *truth* by which an understanding of *facts* about the world is developed. *Truth*, then, is an evaluation of a linguistic-epistemological expression according to some connection with the extra-mental world based on presumed ascriptive intentions. However, *truth* here is purely (and only) an *evaluation* of propositional meaning as distinct from linguistic meaning. We often mislabel what I would call *semantic coherence* to be a judgment of truth, though, as touched on above, semantic coherence is merely a feature of the lexical-conceptual framework without ascriptive intention by which any truth-evaluation is possible. It would be incoherent (rather than false) to say *the bachelor is married* because the concept of *bachelorhood* semantically entails a man who has never married. This is a semantic judgment of an expression that does not require ascriptive connections with the world—we know it is incoherent without a reference to any particular man in the world. The same holds of our judgment that individuated agency determines an individuated entity, as in the example of my cat *Chloë* in Part One, and other such entailments that determine the way we are capable of understanding of the mind-external world.

*Factual truth*, on the other hand, relies on *ascriptive intention* for evaluation: when we ascribe a linguistic-epistemological expression to some aspect of either our

prior knowledge or present experience, we evaluate whether or not it succeeds: whether or not *Richard Nixon was born in 1913* is *true* depends on evaluation according to an ascription of meanings to aspects of the world: did the person to which we intend to ascribe the characteristics under the label *Richard Nixon* begin his life at a point in time to which we would also ascribe the label *1913*? Ascription is always an aspect of intention, which can change from person to person, though social agreement (which has nothing whatsoever to do with determining fundamental properties of purely linguistic meaning) will fix certain presumptions of ascription and thus factual truth for a particular culture, society, or group. Without a fixed social agreement, it is often merely a matter of choice whether we want to consider particular conceptual perspectives upon objects of experience to be appropriate or not. Chomsky's examples of whether a belief that *machines think*, *airplanes fly*, or *submarines swim* may or may not be true are "questions of decision, not fact" (Chomsky 2000, p. 148). *Truth* does not seem to be a useful concept for the consideration of meaning, but may be helpful in thinking about certain aspects of culture or identity, for which some body of *knowledge* is a constituent feature. Knowledge is only ever individuated, however, and it is the assumption of equivalency of knowledge and the concomitant equivalencies of ascriptive intentions and propositional truths among individuals by which presumptions of cultural unity are made.

Because ascriptive intention is only a feature of the intention of a person *using* a linguistic-epistemological expression (either in production or extra-linguistic interpretation), not a property of the expression itself, and literary texts therefore do not have inherent ascriptive intentions, a literary text cannot be evaluated for any kind of "truth value" except as a property of a reader's intentions for the text, which may derive

from assumptions about genre or other contextual concomitants. Likewise, the literary text will only connect with a reader's prior cultural knowledge inasmuch as the reader *presumes* coincident ascriptive intentions for a reading of the text with the propositions that make up that knowledge. Literary texts as linguistic-epistemological objects need not suffer ascriptive intentions of any kind: as linguistic expressions, they attach to sufficient innate meaning in a reader to awaken the immediate experience of literary understanding in such phenomena as Gardner's fictive dream.

In the opening sentence of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, quoted above, the proposition that Bilbo *announced that he would be shortly celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence* seems, with its use of *birthday* and *party*, to require some kind of cultural knowledge to account for our experience of understanding. This is exactly the kind of assumption Charles Fillmore (2006) makes in his "Frame Semantics" by which "nobody could be said to know the meanings of [words] who did not know the details of the kind of scene which provided the background and motivation for the categories which these words represent" (p. 378): this background is what Fillmore calls a *Frame*: "the frame structures the word-meanings, [and] the word 'evokes' the frame" (p. 378). Fillmore's analysis of word meanings is based on "an awareness of the importance of the social functions of language" (Fillmore 1976, p. 23) and is fundamentally a theory of meaning within *communication* rather than *understanding*: "Some words exist in order to provide access to knowledge of . . . frames to the participants in the communication process" (Fillmore 2006, p. 381). As we discussed in Part One, analysis of language based merely on communication opens up the indeterminacy of *intention* in meaning, which forces any analysis to examine the context

for some potentially correlative factors that might offer clues to such intentions: “the process of understanding a word requires us to call on our memories of experiences—selected, filtered, and generalized—through which we have learned the words” (Fillmore 1976, p. 27).

Nevertheless, we must remember that any understanding of *context*, and hence any constituent experiences of understanding that we may have had, must be founded upon the capacity for epistemological thought provided by the innate features of the language faculty in its syntax and lexical-conceptual framework by which human knowledge and understanding are made possible. Semantic frames are merely a kind of *knowledge*, a set of factual propositions that an individual can *ascribe*, according to his or her intentions, to various phenomena of the world. Fillmore (1976) suggests as much, saying, “Every memorable experience occurs in a meaningful context and is memorable precisely because the experiencer has some cognitive schema or frame for interpreting it. This frame identifies the experience as a type and gives structure and coherence—in short, meaning—to the points and relationships, the objects and events, within the experience” (p. 26). An accumulation of such experiences, according to Fillmore, provides “a frame [that] is a kind of outline figure with not necessarily all the details filled in” (p. 29) because those experiences are “selected, filtered, and generalized” (p. 27). However, we must remind ourselves that the lexical-conceptual framework and its manipulations by syntax limit possible understanding, so that there is no such thing as *learning* as is traditionally understood: the experiences Fillmore describes must be understood according to the epistemological capacity provided by the language faculty *a priori* of the experience, and it is merely the *labels* for extant conceptual paradigms,

nexuses within the lexical-conceptual framework, that must be internalized in language acquisition. Fillmore's *Frame Semantics* and the theoretical paradigms that developed out of it (such as the "conceptual metaphors" of George Lakoff) seem to merely comprise some aspect of a person's knowledge of words, the phonetic externalization of conceptual packages made possible by the innate framework. A person who has learned English to some degree of sufficiency must attach the word *birthday* to a conceptual nexus within the lexical-conceptual framework that elicits associated knowledge for potential ascriptions. This is what allows a person to generate ascriptive intention for the word and the associated knowledge, as Fillmore (2006) describes: "in the process of using a language, a speaker 'applies' a frame to a situation, and shows that he intends this frame to be applied by using words recognized as grounded in such a frame" (p. 382).

In this way, analysis of the experiential understanding of *birthday* and *party* can be developed according to the same approach by which we examine any other words and syntactic relationships within a text, requiring no dependency upon cultural context, only descriptive reliance upon the foundation of the innate lexical-conceptual framework by which cultural knowledge is constructed. Knowledge of what we call *English* is merely knowledge of the appropriate conceptual nexus to which a word/label such as *birthday* or *party* is attached so that an encounter with that word elicits the appropriate package for our linguistic-epistemological understanding. Fillmore's *Semantic Frames* can be a useful way to talk about such structures, as long as we understand how such frames are developed out of innate knowledge—but the properties of such knowledge always remain derivative of the lexical-conceptual framework and hence subject to the same explanatory principles of the fictive experience that we have been pursuing.

No matter how culturally determined the meaning of a word *seems* to be upon reflection, the conceptual apparatus by which any human being is capable of understanding such a meaning *must* be provided by the innate lexical-conceptual framework, otherwise it would be beyond the capacity for human beings to understand. It is only the cultural *ascriptive intention* that is influenced by the context of social agreement, and this must ever be a feature of the *intentions* of the reader that may or may not reflect upon the intentions of the author. Hence, the foundation by which any literary text can be *understood* or *experienced* is the innate conceptual framework provided to all human beings by our genetic heritage. Though Stanley Fish claims that “theory will never succeed [because] it cannot help but borrow its terms and its content from that which it claims to transcend, the mutable world of practice, belief, assumptions, point of view, and so forth” (Fish 1985, p. 438), in fact we can reverse his dictum: “practice, belief, assumptions, point of view, and so forth” are *made possible* within the scope provided by the structure of innate knowledge, and it is upon this foundation that human understanding, including both cultural context and the understanding of any literary text, is made.

#### 5 - Abeyance of Knowledge in Literary Experience

Ascriptive intentions are influenced and often determined by a person’s prior knowledge. Even words such as *sun* or *house* that may come into play in the most imaginative Fantasy Fiction hold a tension with prior knowledge: our understanding of the word, even as a purely cognitive object, must contend with the host of prior ascriptions we have encountered or made. When I read a biography of *Richard Nixon*, all

my prior knowledge of *Richard Nixon* comes into play. Likewise, when I read a story that talks about a “Sun,” all my prior ascriptions of *sun* come to bear upon that reading. Hence, our experience in reading *birthday* in the first line of *The Lord of the Rings* is necessarily contingent. The label evokes a particular conceptual package as discussed in the previous section, a conceptual package something like Fillmore’s Semantic Frame that is a kind of *knowledge* nonetheless based on the innate lexical conceptual framework by which our full experience of the text is made possible.

However, although we can presume equivalency in our knowledge for the understanding of a literary text, any such knowledge must be held in *abeyance*. Orson Scott Card (1990) describes this principle in the context of reading speculative fiction like Fantasy and Science Fiction: “Experienced sf [science fiction] readers recognize that they don’t know what [some term] is, and that the author doesn’t expect them to know . . . [instead, they know that] the author will in due course explain what the term means” (p. 91). Although Card notes this principle as a feature of reading speculative fiction that contrasts with reading other kinds of fiction, I would argue that this is a feature of all fictive experience. As I noted in a footnote in Part One above, our own knowledge must stand in, modulo some set of adjustments by which it is made equivalent to our assumptions of the knowledge of an interlocutor, in order to assume the necessary context by which we might guess a speaker’s intentions. In the same way, when we encounter a word that elicits a cognitive frame, or any kind of conceptual package that includes some kind of cultural *knowledge* provided by the truth-value conditions of ascriptive intention, we must supply our own such knowledge, but hold that understanding in partial *abeyance* until we encounter (or fail to encounter) alternative defining propositions that would

adjust our conceptual understanding.

This abeyance of our cultural knowledge is how we must understand *Birthday* and *party* in the excerpt: our knowledge of what a *birthday party* might be will suffice, as a generalized semantic framework, until the text provides details by which this framework can begin to be fleshed out and made distinct. A few paragraphs into the text, we see that *Bilbo and Frodo happened to have the same birthday, September 22nd*, which confirms some aspect of our abeyant understanding: that a *birthday* occurs on a specified date. Even the assumption that a *birthday party* is a *celebration* (confirmed by Bilbo's stated belief that *we can celebrate our birthday-parties* a few sentences later) provides grounds for equivalence. Much of the early part of the first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* serves to flesh out and characterize Bilbo's *birthday party*, as that *party* serves an important function in the story, the proximate circumstance wherein important events occur, and quite a bit of information is provided that allows our abeyant knowledge to be slowly confirmed as we progress. Eventually, however, we encounter *disconfirming* description:

*Hobbits give presents to other people on their own birthdays. Not very expensive ones, as a rule, and not so lavishly as on this occasion; but it was not a bad system.* (p. 26-7)

We notice that the proposition of habit or propensity represents a kind of epistemological proposition that provides equating knowledge to help define the kind of *birthday party* represented within the fictive dream of the text, and we must adjust our abeyant knowledge appropriately.

Abeyance even comes into play with such seemingly ordinary terms as *talk* and



*excitement*, also from the first line of the novel, the characteristics of which must be held abeyant until characterizing propositions are offered by the text. A few paragraphs into the chapter (p. 22), we encounter the premise of a scene that will further develop the characteristics of this *talk* and *excitement*. As we progress into the action that follows, the exchange of propositions serves to characterize the *talk* first mentioned in the initial sentence, allowing our abeyant understanding to be partly developed.

Hence, although some version of Fillmore's notion of Semantic Frames, understood in the context of the innate knowledge provided by the language faculty, provides some aspect of understanding by which the experience of reading a text is brought about, the knowledge within that Frame must to some degree be held abeyant to further clarification and development. In this way, the experience of any literary text must be an ongoing and self-reflective process as ideas and understanding are developed over time through the progress of the reading. This makes a literary text a self-contained and self-referential set of linguistic-epistemological propositions, defining a kind of systemic unity we presume of such texts. Such principles as *abeyance* might help to explain and describe the manner by which this unity arises.

In addition, this self-referential nature opens the possibility that a literary text can be evaluated by the notion of *coherence*, or whether its constituent propositions cohere with one another or whether there arise contradictions. John Gardner (1983a) contrasts offensive incoherence with inoffensive: "We're not talking here about superficial slips like—in *Absalom, Absalom!*—Faulkner's description of a house as built of, in one passage, wood and, in another place, stone. For mistakes of this kind, as for slips of the tongue, the sympathetic reader makes silent correction. The mistakes that offend in a

would-be work of art are serious slips in reasoning” (p. 4). Egregious incoherence arises when propositional knowledge provided by the text fails of semantic entailments and the resultant consequences that the innate lexical-conceptual framework provides for our understanding. For example, a character that seems to be imbued with self-will and agency should be understood as exercising this will by making choices. A fictive text that establishes such a character but later propositionally establishes that the character has no agency will by this criterion be incoherent. This incoherence arises as a feature of our understanding of a text as a unified whole: one part should not contradict another. As with abeyant knowledge, the text as a cognitive object of understand requires its complete fulfillment to be actualized in the minds of readers.

## 6 - The Cognitive Unity of the Literary Experience

One of the foundations of literary criticism, which was made explicit in the New Criticism and survives in all criticism since, is that “the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity” (Brooks 1951, p. 72). The premise that a literary text must be taken as a unified whole is such a foundational assumption that it is often assumed as axiomatic without argument, and likely most critics will never question the assumption. For example, Tolkien’s “literary belief” is presumed on a sense of literary unity. Even the argument of this *essai* has assumed an axiomatic unity in the principles of literary experience we have been discussing, especially and explicitly in the discussion of coherence and abeyance in the previous section. However, abeyance of knowledge can only be fulfilled if we presume that a text really is unified so that early propositional content and later propositional content have any relationship with one another.

Coherence relies on this assumption as well: why would it matter if one proposition is incoherent with another except in the case that we presume unity? Although we argued that such features of the text help *create* a sense of unity, that argument at the end of the previous section actually begs the question.

However, like many features of the lexical-conceptual framework, unity, or *discreteness*, autonomy, is a cognitive predisposition and entailment. In general, “the human mind is tuned to detect patterns, and it is biased toward false positives rather than false negatives” (Gottschall 2012, p. 103). This is the phenomenon of pareidolia, the disposition of the human mind to find pattern in noise. This disposition is why we see faces among the knots in woodgrain or hear muttering voices in a rush of water: the human mind is tuned to understand a human world, and it interprets experience as though it were that world, leading, as Gottschall points out, to a bias toward false positives. Gottschall also points out that “our hunger for meaningful patterns translates into a hunger for story” so that “we automatically extract stories from the information we receive” (p. 104). Given a random assortment of linguistic propositions, “a healthy storytelling mind . . . will automatically start to weave [the propositions] together into the beginnings of a story” (p. 104). Our intuitions about the unity of the literary text, that the set of linguistic-epistemological propositions that comprise it will work together to make a unified whole, derives from this predisposition: after all, the understanding we have of the literary text is itself based on the properties of the lexical-conceptual framework and the way in which we understand objects of experience, as we discussed in Chapter One (consider that the discussions of *table*, *cat*, and *Chloë* discussed there likewise entail a slightly different concept of *unity* that we ascribe to objects of experience). Unity, then,

is not a property of a literary text that comes to us from outside, but a property we impose upon the text as a feature of the way in which we intuitively understand it. We can tautologically presume our conclusion of unity in the premises of our argument as we did for coherence above because that conclusion is foundational to our epistemological capacity.<sup>10</sup>

A literary text is a unified whole because that is the way in which our minds work. Chomsky (1975) observes, “We do not regard a herd of cattle as a physical object, but rather as a collection, though there would be no logical incoherence in the notion of a scattered object. . . . Furthermore, scattered entities can be taken to be single physical objects under some conditions: consider a picket fence with breaks, or a Calder mobile. The latter is a ‘thing,’ whereas a collection of leaves on a tree is not. The reason, apparently, is that the mobile is created by an act of human will” (p. 203). Because we consider a literary text as a crafted thing, we ascribe it a sense of unity and name it as being a singular thing so that reading it constitutes a singular experience (even if we break up that reading over several sessions). In a story collection, texts composed by different authors or by the same author under different circumstances or purposes do not comprise a singular or unified experience, but rather a collection of discrete, autonomous-but-unified experiences. Presumably, if we conceptualized a text as a random assortment of linguistic expressions, we would imbue it with no such unity—it is an assumption of arrangement, of *authorship*, that creates textual unity. This is a cognitive predisposition.

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<sup>10</sup> It’s important to remember that such understanding has no consequence for the nature of objects outside of the way in which we think about them according to the dispositions of our innate capacity.

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These explanatory principles of the experience of a literary text arise easily when we understand such experience to be the result of the epistemological nature of the faculty of language. The epistemological capacity by which we understand the world provides that we understand literary texts as discrete, unified objects. And because linguistic expressions are expressions of *understanding*, a unified text that is coherent must create what Tolkien called “Literary Belief.” Such belief arises because the experience is propositionally semantic rather than imagistic, and the apparent experience of the mental “movie” of fiction is only an illusion. In addition, Literary Belief is unified because the text creates a single cognitive object of understanding, providing internal coherence for its propositions of meaning by which abeyant knowledge is either fulfilled or adjusted. The belief we derive from any text can have consequences for our understanding of the text-external world, but only according to our own intentions, which are influenced by such things as our cultural knowledge of genre-conventions by which ascriptive intentions are assumed.

### PART THREE: THE PRAXIS OF LITERARY CRITICISM

If the experience of the literary text can be explained by a scientific cognitive approach founded on the lexical-conceptual framework and syntax that comprise the language faculty, this leaves open the question of what it is literary critics should do with texts. Literary Criticism has long regarded its purview to be explaining the *meaning* of literary works, even when the anti-theory dominating the discipline unsettles the pursuit of meanings. The scientific approach to literature as an object of inquiry by which literary meaning is understood to be identical to literary experience nevertheless leaves the critical approach undetermined. In Part Three, I will suggest the return of a kind of literary formalism in a Cognitive Formalism by which the literary-critical enterprise can take shape.

#### 1 - A Cognitive Formalism for Literary Experience

As we began this *essai* by noting, “the most important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic’s job is to interpret literary works” (Culler 1976, p. 246). And yet we have seen that the *meaning* of a literary text is necessarily identical with the *experience* of the text that is the process of linguistic-epistemological understanding: the experience is always extemporaneous, based on the momentary functioning of a particular human mind for a particular reading at a particular moment in history. The experience of having read, the unitary cognitive object so produced with all its resolved abeyances and epistemic

coherence, becomes a mental object upon which we can reflect. A rereading or a reading by another person, or one done a thousand years later, should awaken in the moment of reading a particular arrangement of the innate lexical-conceptual framework available to any human mind: each of these experiences, inasmuch as human minds are genetically similar, and inasmuch as an author has succeeded and a reader has a sufficiency of knowledge, must be more-or-less the same to a very large degree.

For this reason, a critic can perfectly explicate such understanding, to enact Susan Sontag's desire that "the function of criticism should be to show *how [art] is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*" (emphasis original, Sontag 1966, p. 745), simply by describing the way in which the lexical-conceptual framework on which the experience of the text is founded has been deployed for appreciation by a human mind. Sontag points out, "Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted" (p. 745). For Sontag, rather than interpreting a literary text, "acts of criticism . . . would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of a work of art" (p. 745). Hence, the process by which an inert text is transformed into an experience can be *explained* by a cognitive perspective; but this is not a form of *interpretation* because it is purely reflexive: we could not do otherwise with a literary text since we are constrained by our innate faculties. This explanatory paradigm, as Northrop Frye (1957) points out, is *Poetics*.

Aristotle's *Poetics* begins by outlining its purpose: "I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same

inquiry” (p. 3). Aristotle does not seek a methodology by which *meaning* can be derived from the literary object, but acknowledges what he sees as the common nature of poetry as “modes of imitation” (p. 3) and seeks to find descriptive principles by which an understanding of poetry as a discipline can be pursued. More than two millennia later, Northrop Frye (1957) tried to revert literary criticism to Aristotle’s purposes: “I suggest that it is time for criticism to leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are. Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which . . . will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole” (p. 16). If we therefore begin with the explanatory principles provided by the Chomskyan paradigm in the innateness of the lexical-conceptual framework and the syntax of the language faculty by which the experience of literary texts is brought about, we can begin to adumbrate a poetics of forms or genre: for example, the discussion of ascriptive intention from Part Two by which a reader’s presumption of a text’s ascriptive intention produces generic distinctions.

Additionally, even if interpretation need not be the focus of criticism, Culler (1976) notes that “it would require a strenuous consciousness of effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work [and] the importance of demonstrating its unity” (p. 244). According to Cleanth Brooks (1951), patriarch of the New Criticism, the work of a critic is “indicating to an interested reader what the work is and how the parts of it are related” (p. 81), stressing that “the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity” (p. 72). Roland Barthes (1963) recapitulates Brooks, saying, “the critic is not responsible for reconstructing the work’s message but only its system” (p. 260), though



even for Barthes, as it is for Brooks, explication of the system serves as explication of the message. Our discussion in Part Two of abeyance and coherence rely on this sense of unity of the literary text, and any explanation of the literary experience must acknowledge and account for such principles that comprise that experience.

Formalist Criticism was defined by Brooks in his “Credo,” where he insisted that anything that can be said of a literary work must “rest finally upon our knowing what a given work ‘means’” so that “[such] knowledge is basic” (p. 81). Given our reconsideration of literary *meaning* as epistemological *experience* of the work brought about by the language faculty, we can reinterpret Brooks’s edict for criticism for the purposes of a cognitive theory of literary texts and thereby derive what might be called a *Cognitive Formalism* by which “literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object” (p. 72).

Literary criticism according to such a Cognitive Formalism must depend upon these two purposes, *description* and *evaluation* for the outlining of its procedures. Description of any literary text depends on the explanatory principles that a scientific perspective gives, allowing the critic to explicate the precise way in which any text is capable of eliciting its experience within a reader’s mind according to the principles by which the language faculty creates such experience. In this way, any theory of literature must be founded upon a theory of human cognition, and discoveries made about the nature of literary texts can serve to fulfill the interdisciplinary dreams of literary critics: but rather than simply borrowing concepts, *ex situ*, from other disciplines and rendering them into an interpretive “lens” by which to recapitulate the borrowed concept additive to some hapless text (as in the way Spolsky (2002) attempts to use Darwin’s theory of

evolution by natural selection); rather, with true interdisciplinarity critics can pursue a reciprocation of understanding that can serve to advance both disciplines.<sup>11</sup> The kind of literary theory we are pursuing here provides the opportunity for literary criticism to reciprocate its understanding with other cognitive sciences in order to advance the human scientific endeavor in several disciplines. In this way, *describing* the way in which explanatory principles act in the reading of any literary text might offer data by which theoretical paradigms in the cognitive sciences can be adjusted and advanced.

Likewise, the properties that are found to be within literary texts because of the principles that give them shape can in turn serve as principles of organization which would offer the means whereby literature as a whole can be structured. Northrop Frye (1957) notes that “only one organizing principle has so far been discovered in literature, the principle of chronology” (p. 16), which was left over from the historicism against which the New Critics and other Formalists were reacting, and insists that “it is time for criticism to leap to a new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are” (p. 16). Although some of the current cognitive approaches to literature, such as those pursued in narratology and other relatively empirical literary projects, have begun to offer a renaissance of such organizing principles, the Scientific Cognitive Formalism established in this *essai* as a foundational theoretical paradigm offers a systematic means by which this project can be further pursued, including such principles as those outlined in Part Two.

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<sup>11</sup> Much as the Quantum Revolution in Physics helped to unify the discipline with Chemistry and offer avenues of advancement for both disciplines.

## 2 - Literary Criticism and Ethical Judgment

A foundational “credo” of traditional Formalism is that “the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular” (Brooks 1951, p. 72). This has been assumed to determine the critic’s task of interpretation: that is, the explication of a text’s *meaning* is to point out the universal human values for which its “concrete” and “particular” depictions stand in as signifying. John Gardner (1983a) considers the “‘meaning’ of works of art” to be “some larger, *secondary* meaning, not just one person’s feeling but a universal human feeling, some affirmation or recognition of value” (p. 61) which derives from the concrete details of the work.

However, rather than opening avenues of interpretation, this postulate of the Formalists that the concrete suggests general universals should in fact give us the means to pursue the second purpose of criticism: *evaluation*. Evaluation must be based on description, in that the experience of the concrete particulars of a literary text can only be explicated by a description of the explanatory principles in action for a particular literary text, and then evaluation of the experience so brought about derives therefrom. In the realm of Fiction, “the writer’s first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened” (Gardner 1983a, p. 15). The writer must “present, moment by moment, concrete images drawn from a careful observation of how people behave, and he must render the connections between moments . . . that . . . move human beings from emotion to emotion, from one instant in time to the next” (p. 24). This is the means by which the writer intends to create the fictive dream, and pronouncements like this can offer guidance for

how we evaluate the effectiveness of such presentation, the effectiveness of the creation of a Fictive Dream.

But Gardner goes further. For him, the writing of fiction is philosophical: the writer “must learn to see fiction’s elements . . . as the fundamental units of an ancient but still valid kind of thought. . . [a] concrete philosophy” (p. 36). Following the Formalists, Gardner stresses that the concrete details of fiction leads to a “primary emotion . . . [that] must sooner or later lift off from the particular and be transformed to an expression of what is universally good in human life—what promotes happiness for the individual alone and in society; in other words, some statement of value” (p. 62). William Faulkner observed something similar in his Nobel acceptance speech (1950), that only “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . [are] worth writing about.” It is only “the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed.” Anne Lamott (1994) gives the advice to young writers that because “writing motivates you to look closely at life” (p. xii), the writer gains a special perspective, and her purpose at that point is to express what she sees: “good writing is about telling the truth” (p. 3). In the end, “Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave . . . they show us how to live and die. . . . An author *makes* you notice, makes you pay attention” (p. 15) so that evaluation of any fictive text should be an evaluation of the universal verities of the human experience that the author is bringing to our attention through his or her presentation of specific and particular detail.

However, Gardner (1983a) explains that such expression of value is not translatable: “in good fiction, this universal statement is likely to be too subtle, too loaded with qualifications, to be expressed in any way but the story’s way; it may be impossible,

that is, to reduce to any rule of behavior or general thesis. We *understand* the value, understand it with great precision, but even the shrewdest literary critic may have trouble formulating it in words and thus telling us the story's 'message'" (p. 62). The *value* of this "message" need not even be conscious: Gottschall (2012) explains that "research shows that story is constantly nibbling and kneading us, shaping our minds without our knowledge or consent" because it "teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behavior, perhaps even our personalities" (p. 148). Likewise, any such effect in any individual reader will always be the unaccountable result of a complex of inexhaustible contextual influences and will remain inexplicable: that is, like the weather on any given day, there are far too many variables at play within an individual that are entirely beyond our capacity to gather the requisite information to generate a descriptively adequate account. Such a Sisyphean account could never comprise the work of a literary critic. Likewise, if we reduce this effect to some kind of refined "meaning" of the text, the problems of intention and creativity outlined in Part One undermine any pursuit of a definitive answer.

The key is to notice that the effect need not be explicated in infinitesimal detail in order to be *evaluated*. This has been the traditional form of literary criticism before the interpretive turn: *poetics* is concerned with descriptions of the various kinds and aspects of literary objects, offering descriptive accounts, while *criticism* has traditionally been a judgment upon such objects and the capacity and artistry of authors to bring about literary effects. As John Gardner (1978) outlined, "Critics would be useful people to have around if they would simply do their work, carefully and thoughtfully assessing works of art, calling our attention to those worth noticing, and explaining clearly, sensibly, and justly

why others need not take up our time” (p. 127). Wayne Booth (1988) notes that despite the fact that evaluative, ethical criticism has been so derided under the paradigm of postmodern relativism (and even before), “we can no longer pretend that ethical criticism is passé. It is practiced everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, and often badly, partly because it is the most difficult of all critical modes, but partly because we have so little serious talk about why it is important, what purposes it serves, and how it might be done well” (p. 19). Literary interpretation, or the search for the “meaning” of a text is in fact a kind of evaluation, though this fact has been lost on the many theoretical approaches to meaning that presume we must seek something that is somehow semantic.

Nevertheless, literary evaluation, judgmental criticism, relies on the fact that “fiction virtually always puts us in a position judge wrongdoing” (Gottschall 2012, p. 130). Such judgment is the result when a reader “transform[s] [the fictive dream] to an expression of what is universally good in human life—what promotes happiness for the individual alone and in society” (Gardner 1983a, p. 62). This effect is not exclusively context-sensitive: “one need only think of the fictions that have lasted: . . . Such works—all true works of art—can exert their civilizing influence century after century, long after the cultures that produced them have decayed” (Gardner 1978, p. 105). This is because “at its best fiction is . . . a way of thinking, a philosophical method” (p. 107) so that “the writer makes discoveries which, in the act of discovering them in his fiction, he communicates to the reader” (p. 109): “in fiction we stand back, weigh things as we do not have time to do in life; and the effect of great fiction is to temper real experience, modify prejudice, humanize” (p. 114). Hence, the evaluation of fiction arises from the methods by which the fictive dream is produced, by which the experience of linguistic-

epistemological understanding comes about. It is in the ways by which we *know* characters and their actions, the awakening of conceptual packages that produce in our minds an understanding of human beings with agency and will who engage in some set of situations that reveals the kind of human beings that they are. Wayne Booth (1988) notes that ethical criticism might “begin . . . with the qualities of experience sought or achieved by authors and readers *during* the time of telling or listening [so that] we now will ask what kind of company it offers me today” (p. 169). Fiction, according to Gottschall (2012), “puts us in the position of approving of decent, prosocial behavior and disapproving of the greed of antagonists . . . fiction is, in its essence, deeply moral” (p. 132). This distinction is ancient, arising in Aristotle’s critique of Plato: whereas Plato condemned poetry for being mere imitation, Aristotle saw in this mimesis of life the capacity for the poet to show his audience “what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity,” making the literary “more philosophical and a higher thing than history” (Aristotle 2005, p. 27) or the mere reportage of events that must be ascribed to the world.

The evaluation of character, including a character’s understood personality, which leads the character to the purposes and desires he pursues, apparent choices he makes,<sup>12</sup> and change he undergoes, is a reflection upon the object of understanding produced by the literary text. One person may like the character while another—even the same person

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<sup>12</sup> In reality, the text is deterministic: characters simply cannot have freedom of the will.

We understand them thus because we reflexively understand ourselves and other mental agencies, including other human beings, as if they had such freedom (whether or not they really do).

at a different reading— dislikes him. One may support the choices made by the character while another sharply disapproves. The response is not a part of the text, but a reflection upon it. This is in fact the distinction made by Wimsatt and Beardsley in “The Affective Fallacy” (1949): they call attention to the difference between a meaning that exists within a text and the emotional response of readers, which entails a “separation of emotive from referential meaning” (p. 1247), what we would call here the linguistic-epistemological meaning, or experience of the text. For Wimsatt and Beardsley and other New Critics, the center of meaning was the text and only the text, and “the more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for emotion, the poem itself” (p. 1257). In our scientific cognitive formalism, on the other hand, while we may agree that the emotional response is a result of the mind’s consideration of objects of understanding created by the literary text, we note that this is more or less identical to having emotional responses to human beings and things that happen in daily life: our reactions are to cognitive objects constructed mind-internally as a way to understand those people and events, not the human beings or events themselves that exist mind-externally. In other words, emotional response does not rely on ascriptive intention, only understanding. Furthermore, the emotional response is itself equally a product of the mind, though the product of a different cognitive faculty: an *emotive* faculty. We can agree with Wimsatt and Beardsley that the strictest meaning of any literary text should remain the linguistic-epistemological experience, but emotive responses to such experience seem to be equally reflexive: that is, they do not arise by conscious reflection but are “gut” reactions to an understanding of characters and events.

In fact, social emotions are often an evolutionary solution to the problem of



encouraging social behaviors among individuated conspecifics: “As creatures began to act in more complex and flexible ways, nature evolved emotions to motivate better decisions” (Boyd 2009, p. 403), and “the social emotions first evolved in direct encounters with others, as a guide to whom we should deal with and whom we should avoid, and in what circumstances” (p. 173). Hence, some emotive reactions may be the result of our genetics, more-or-less genetically reflexive responses to particular mental stimuli, as in the case of our emotional reflexes to particular human-social situations such as fear of a stranger or anger at economic or social cheaters. Texts that create such situations for our conceptual understanding will be likely to generate such emotions nearly universally. Though such results of the emotive faculty are reflexive and not under conscious control, in terms of the literary experience, they are *reflective* because they reflect upon the experience of the literary text rather than being directly generated as a linguistic-epistemological property of that experience. Such emotional reactions are *reflexive reflections* upon the experience of the literary text, generated reflexively in response to fictive situations that are a part of the fictive dream. This puts emotive reflection into the purview of the explanatory capacity of a scientific methodology, making the emotional response to a text data for cognitive science. Since evaluation of character and situation is fundamentally a result of emotional reaction, in the same way that we evaluate the people we meet and the situations we find ourselves in, we can base such evaluation in the explanatory principles of a cognitive science of emotions. Since judgment of literature is itself a reflexive activity based on emotional reactions, we are simply lending principled, scientific validity to our natural judgments, giving a firm basis on which to practice evaluative literary criticism.

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Ultimately, there is no hidden *meaning* that must be *interpreted* out of a literary text, just as there are no authorial *intentions* that need guessing at, nor self-reinforcing confirmations of an *a priori* theoretical “lens.” A scientific cognitive perspective upon the object of our discipline offers for literary criticism a fecund and interdisciplinary field of inquiry by which genre-making principles of Literature can be discovered as well as a principled framework by which the experience of the literary text can be explicated and explained and a human-universal basis by which *criticism*, the exercise of ethical judgment upon the experience of a literary text, can be pursued. The consequences upon our understanding of Literature as an object of inquiry of the fact that the literary text’s principle component, language, is a human-cognitive faculty of epistemological thought by which experience is made intelligible, have immensely wide-ranging and discipline-shattering implications for the *praxis* of literary criticism, of which only a tiny portion has been here pursued.

## PART FOUR: SOME BASIC PROPERTIES OF A LITERARY TEXT

Cognitive Formalism, as it has been sketched here, begins with a description of the literary experience according to explanatory principles that give rise to specific properties of the literary text. In Part Four we will examine a selection of such properties by looking at brief passages from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. As far as I can tell, no one has done this kind of explication for literary work before, and though I will draw on the work of other scholars in different disciplines, these examinations of properties of the literary experience must be merely inchoate first approximations of the way in which the linguistic-epistemological state of understanding is generated by the mind's encounter with text.

### 1 - Principles of Fictive Time and Immediacy

Fictive Time is the sense we have of the temporal sequencing of events in a fictive text. This is accomplished primarily by the syntax of the linguistic-epistemological expressions that comprise the text through such features as the tense and aspect of the verb, but the fictive experience of time relies on the vantage point from which we view events, and this vantage point creates the feeling of immediacy for our experience. We can begin to see how this comes about by considering the first sentence of Tolkien's novel:

*When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there*

*was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.* (p. 21)

The sentence begins with *when*, which we recognize immediately as temporal, and naïve criticism might connect “When” with “Once upon a Time,” a traditional opening for a Fairy-Story, which was a great influence on Tolkien. But *when* actually does not *begin* the sentence: the linear order of the words is a feature of linguistic externalization, and “the brain apparently does not seem to compute left-to-right order at all for internal syntactic purposes” (Berwick and Chomsky 2016, p. 119). *When* here is syntactically a *coordinator*, a syntactic function that coordinates two words, phrases, or (in this case) clauses. The first sentence of the text could be rewritten *There was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton when Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced [etc.]* without a loss of propositional meaning. We can even notice this coordinating effect in our experience of reading by the expectation that is established by *when* that two propositions will follow: e.g. *when Mr. Bilbo Baggins announced* seems unfinished because we expect a second sentence to fulfill the coordination. Semantically, *when* establishes a temporal relationship between the coordinated elements, suggesting that one marks the temporal starting place of the other. This begins to establish Fictive Time as a property of the linguistic-epistemological experience of the text.

Fictive Time has no inherent ascriptive intention as a consequence of the nature of the literary text, as discussed in Part Two, so the experience one has of Fictive Time must be purely cognitive, based on the innate capacity the human mind has for understanding temporal relations. Steven Pinker (2007) notes that the way in which our linguistic capacity expresses time “makes the location of events in time highly vague” because “the imprecision in the way languages express time is related to the imprecision in the way we

experience and remember it” (p. 190). Our understanding of *when* requires the understanding elicited by the grammar of the verbs: specifically, “Time is encoded in grammar in two ways. The familiar one is tense, which can be thought of as the ‘location’ of an event or state in time. . . . The other timekeeper is called aspect . . . ; it can be thought of as the shape of an event in time” (p. 192). Hence, the main verbs (setting aside the subordinated phrase) are *announced* and *was*: *When [he] announced . . . , there was . . . .* We know, based on tense, the “location” of the event, that *when* is the past: but the vagueness of our native understanding of time leaves this location wide open, allowing us to understand the event as having occurred at any moment within “the history of the universe prior to the moment of speaking” (p. 190), or in this case, moment of reading.

Despite this inherent temporal vagueness, past-tense events are nevertheless experienced in reading as if they were immediate: that is, we understand past-tense action as if it had happened immediately before we read the sentence. This is despite the dogma that it is “the present tense . . . [that] can achieve the effect of intensity and immediacy, so that the emotional distance between reader and character is diminished” (Burroway 2000, p. 239). In fact, reading a text written in the past tense does not create psychic separation from the events depicted, but maintains an immediacy of experience. The key is what Pinker (2016) suggests, that the text is “sticking to a consistent vantage point” (p. 223), so that our understanding of the events depicted within the text comes from a particular temporal perspective, as provided in the syntax by tense.

Immediacy is an effect of the vantage proffered by the understanding created by the text, not an effect of the temporality of tense. This is what Pinker calls “reference

time,” or “an event that has been identified in the conversation and that is serving as the ‘now’ for the actors in the narrative” (Pinker 2007, p. 194). However, Pinker’s analysis, based as it is on the concept of language as fundamentally a tool of communication, does not extend that concept of the *present* beyond the utterance, because he seems to presume that *present* is always the moment of speaking: for him, then, the literary text would be understood as the expression of an author, as the traditional view has it, and as we critiqued in Part One. Rather, the *present* of any literary text, because it is merely a cognitive object of understanding with no ascriptive intention, and hence cannot be reliably ascribed to any temporal location, must be a free-floating *vantage point*. Mark Turner (1996) describes this vantage point: “The tense of the verb is an instrument for indicating temporal viewpoint and temporal focus on a story partitioned over temporal spaces” (p. 121). Our understanding of actions in a literary text is brought about by the way in which tense and aspect propose the actions on which we focus and the manner by which we see them. Pinker notes that the verb’s *aspect* provides “a third kind of information related to time: the *viewpoint* of an event. An event can be described as if it is being seen from the inside . . . , as in *She was climbing the tree*, or as if it is being seen from the outside . . . , as in *She climbed the tree*” (Pinker 2007, p. 192).

And yet, vantage point and focus need not overlap in order to create a sense of immediacy because “our experience of the present is not an infinitesimal instant. Instead it embraces some minimum duration, a moving window on life in which we apprehend not just the instantaneous ‘now’ but a bit of the recent past and a bit of the impending future. William James called it ‘the specious present’” (p. 189). This can explain why what is called the “simple past” has, for English, become the traditional tense for

storytelling (this is analogous in many other languages): even though the simple past depicts a completed action, the action can still be within our “specious present” so that it will seem to be immediate to our understanding. The key seems to be that the fictive vantage point is drawn as close to the fictive action as possible for the purposes of depiction, whether we need to see the “inside” of an event or merely the fact of its immediate perfection, that is, its completeness. James’s “specious present” is “more or less . . . the duration of an intentional movement” (p. 189) or other cognitive task, which corresponds roughly to the immediacy of vantage that we have on fictive actions. A switch to the present tense in prose is functional for immediacy, since tense does not matter, only vantage, and this is why some languages may make a slightly different choice in the standard tense for telling a story (or, like Swahili, provide a “storytelling tense”). However, a story of definite action could not be told in the future tense with any definitiveness or immediacy because “the future is mere potentiality and can be altered by our choices in the present” according to the “intuitive metaphysics” provided by the faculty of language.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 - Kinds of Event Sequences

This distinction of *vantage point* upon a fictive action or event relates to another property of a literary text, the structure of event sequences, or the way in which actions relate to one another. A few paragraphs into *The Lord of the Rings* we get into the first

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<sup>13</sup> A literary text composed primarily in the future tense (or equivalent) would be trading *definitiveness* and *immediacy* for some other quality of experience related to potentiality, ostensibly for artistic effect.

*scene*: a conversation between *the Gaffer* and a series of interlocutors. Setting aside the content of the conversation, we can see that the *action* of the scene consists of characters speaking. Here are the relevant bits:

. . . *the Gaffer declared.*

. . . *asked Old Noakes of Bywater*

. . . *put in Daddy Twofoot*

. . . *said the Gaffer.*

. . . *said several voices. They had heard this . . . ; but Hobbits have . . . and they were . . .* (p. 22)

Note the verbs. Each is in the simple past, until the excerpt of the last paragraph, and each of these simple-past verbs depicts an action. We can see that the *vantage point* provided by each verb shifts to immediacy in relation to the action. In other words, the fictive vantage point is not fixed, but slides along with each action. This is especially notable in the final action, *said several voices*. Here is an expanded version:

*‘Drowned?’ said several voices. They had heard this and other darker rumors before, of course; but hobbits have a passion for family history, and they were ready to hear it again.* (p. 22)

Note that there is but one *immediate action* here, that of *saying*, which is completed. The subsequent propositions are descriptive, but they maintain the vantage point established by the action: in other words, the vantage point does not move away from the action. The pluperfect tense (*had heard*) relies on this vantage point while the focus changes, casting the *hearing* as having occurred prior to the *saying* (Pinker 2007, p. 194). The shift to present tense in *hobbits have* depicts “a *propensity* of the subject” (p. 204): in this case,



the proposition is *descriptive* rather than temporal. The statement departs from the time-scheme of the narrative, requiring no temporal focus because it is not an event: “English present [can be] used to refer to a state defined by a propensity or habit, not a specific event” (p. 206). Finally, *they were* likewise depicts a state, where “nothing changes” and is contrasted with an event wherein “something happens” (p. 197). The proposition of state maintains the temporal focus at which it is understood, here, immediate to the action of *saying*, which is why the tense remains in the past with *were*. Overall, the action of this sequence of paragraphs remain in a simple series, despite the complexity of tense in the last paragraph. I would call this *serial* action, or the depiction of action wherein the vantage point slides along, like a camera, maintaining immediacy to each action.<sup>14</sup>

Another kind of action-sequence is *recursive* action, or a sequence in which a set of actions recur within a single action. An example occurs a few paragraphs further on:

*. . . An odd-looking wagon laden with odd-looking packages rolled into Hobbiton one evening and toiled up the Hill to Bag End. The startled Hobbits peered out of lamplit doors to gape at it. It was driven by outlandish folk, singing strange songs: dwarves with long beards and deep hoods. A few of them remained at Bag End.* (p. 24)

Here, one event encompasses the following event: *[a] wagon . . . rolled . . . and toiled up* serves as the event within which the following event occurs. Pinker (2007) notes that our

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<sup>14</sup> The sense we have that one action *causes* a subsequent action is related to the reflexive tendency our minds have of assuming causal connections between sequential events, even when none necessarily exists. This tendency is related to many features of the lexical-conceptual framework.

language faculty allows us the capacity of “*zooming in* to scrutinize the internal stuff of an event” (p. 201). He also draws a distinction between “an ‘activity,’ an event that is durative (it lasts in time)” and “a momentaneous event” (p. 198), one that takes only a moment, usually the duration of James’s “specious present.” In the scene, *rolled* and *toiled* are activities, events with duration, so that when the *Hobbits gape at [the wagon]*, we understand the wagon as continuing to perform this activity—the activity is ongoing when *startled Hobbits peered out of lamplit doors*. This is reinforced by the following proposition, *It was driven*, presented as a *state* by the focus on the wagon-as-subject provided by passive voice and *singing* with imperfective aspect which “zooms in on a portion of the action making up a bounded event” (p. 202) so that we see the action—of *singing*—from the “inside.” The two activities of *driving* and *singing* are hence located recursively *within* the activity of *rolling and toiling* upon which *Hobbits peered* in order *to gape*. The last sentence of the excerpt removes us from the recursion, shifting vantage beyond the completed *roll* and *toil*: *A few . . . remained is serial* to the action of the recursive event-sequence.

Another kind of recursive event is depicted nearer the beginning, again relying on the establishment of a temporal vantage point:

*When Bilbo was ninety-nine he adopted Frodo as his heir, and brought him to live at Bag End; and the hopes of the Sackville-Bagginses were finally dashed. Bilbo and Frodo happened to have the same birthday, September 22nd. ‘You had better come and live here, Frodo my lad,’ said Bilbo one day; ‘and then we can celebrate our birthday parties comfortably together.’* (p. 21)

Here again, *When* coordinates two verbs, in this case a state, *Bilbo was ninety-nine*, and

an action, *he adopted Frodo*. The long first sentence is a series of serial actions: *he adopted [and] [he] brought [and] the hopes . . . were finally dashed*. However, because of the when-coordination, all of these events are given the same temporal focus: *when Bilbo was ninety-nine*. These actions are viewed as completed from our vantage outside a particular span of Bilbo's life, each sequentially the focus of our attention from that vantage: the past tense of *was* in the time-establishing clause establishes that we are looking into a state that obtained in the past.<sup>15</sup> This vantage does not shift in the next sentence, which is the expression of a timeless fact, so that with Bilbo's *saying*, expressed in the action of the last sentence, our vantage has not shifted and the *saying* thus occurs as an aspect of the larger, concurrent events of *adopting*, *bringing*, and *dashing*. Hence, although events may be of different shape, such as *rolling* and *adopting*, one durative, the other momentaneous, it is the temporal vantage from which we look, and the focus we have on the event itself, whether inside or as a completed action, that helps determine the character of event-sequence, either serial or recursive. In this way, serial action seems to allow a text to present forward-progressing action in order to "show some profluence of development" and a "casting forward that draws [the reader] from paragraph to paragraph and chapter to chapter" (Gardner 1983a, p. 55). Recursive action highlights some durative event or span of time, giving it detail, and delaying the forward movement in order to develop some aspect of the event that may be important to the story.

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<sup>15</sup> This is reinforced by the preceding paragraphs that scan over a history prior to Bilbo's "eleventy-first" birthday, grammatically shifting vantage and focus to moments when he was fifty, ninety, ninety-nine, and generally scanning over a span of sixty years.

### 3 - Event Sequence as Fictive Argument

The way in which an event sequence is structured has important implications for the moral development of the fictive situation. John Gardner points out that “what the logical progress of an argument is to non-fiction, event-sequence is to fiction” (p. 55), though Gottschall (2012) observes, “fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is *designed* to persuade through argument and evidence” (p. 150). But action *is* the argument of fiction so that the development of the characteristics of some action in a recursive way is often integral to the development of the fictive understanding, the argument of the action. Recursively developing action allows the development of *detail*, which “is the lifeblood of fiction” (Gardner 1983b, p. 34) that creates “concrete images” and “render[s] the connections between moments . . . that . . . move human beings from emotion to emotion, from one instant in time to the next” (Gardner 1983a, p. 24) and provide the moral framework of Gardner’s “concrete philosophy” by which ethical criticism can be applied, as discussed in Part Three.

To extend Gardner’s analogy of fiction to argument, we can note that just as in an argument, which must establish some epistemological axioms from which to develop, so too narrative relies on establishing *scene*.

*Inside Bag End, Bilbo and Gandalf were sitting at the open window of a small room looking out west on the garden. The late afternoon was bright and peaceful. The flowers glowed red and golden: snap-dragons and sunflowers, and nasturtians<sup>16</sup> trailing all over the turf walls and peeping in at the round windows.*

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<sup>16</sup> Tolkien defends this spelling: “*nasturtians* is deliberate. . . . I have always said this. It seems to be a natural anglicization that started soon after the ‘Indian Cress’ was

*'How bright your garden looks!' said Gandalf.*

*'Yes,' said Bilbo. [etc.] (p. 25)*

Here, we can find the basis of axiom-establishing scene-setting within the verbs. The text establishes that *Bilbo and Gandalf were sitting . . . [and] looking*, and both of these verbs have imperfective aspect, suggesting, as above, that we are “inside” the activity of sitting and looking, that what follows must develop from this postulated scenic activity. *Was* indicates a state, as above, developing characterization of the scene, and *glowed* depicts a durative activity that is “atelic (it lacks an inherent endpoint)” (Pinker 2007, p. 198). Note that, like *roll* and *toil*, *glow* gains its durative character not from the aspect provided by syntax, but from the conceptual structure of the action provided by the lexical-conceptual framework. That is why it can be presented in the simple past. However, the *nasturtians [were] trailing*, returns to the imperfective aspect that helps establish scene.

Once the scene is established, the text provides serial events that occur, as if deductively, from these initial premises: Gandalf and Bilbo, in turn, speak, and we understand this action to take place *within* the constraints of the zoomed in, durative activity that sets the scene. If Bilbo were to turn away from the window or stand up, thus disrupting his *sitting*, this action would be a reflection upon the scene, analogous to an

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naturalized (from Peru, I think) in the 18th century; but it remains a minority usage. I prefer it because *nasturtium* is, as it were, bogusly botanical, and falsely learned” (Tolkien 1981, Letter 148, p. 183). Notice, however, that a reader need not know any of this: like any unfamiliar word, many of the lexical-conceptual aspects that are meant to be labeled by the word are provided by what grade-school Reading Teachers call “context clues.” We know *nasturtians* must be a kind of flower.

adjustment or rebuttal of an axiom and hence likely an important concrete depiction of some moral aspect of his character. As it happens, nothing of that sort happens in this particular scene before we move on to another.

If we look again at the opening sentence of the novel (p. 21), we see that *announced* is a momentaneous event, while *was* indicates a state. *When*, then, suggests that it is the momentaneous event of *announcing* which establishes the onset of the state. Compare *When Bilbo announced, there was . . .* to *while Bilbo was announcing, there was . . .* : In the first, the state extends beyond the momentaneous event, while in the second, it is contained within the zoomed-in event viewed as durative activity, established by the imperfective aspect. The text as written, then, places our vantage point after Bilbo's announcement, and the following paragraph maintains that vantage. Many of the verbs there are states, continuing the characterization of the span of time on which we are focusing: *Bilbo was* and *had been*. We notice that the pluperfect tense rests on this post-announcement vantage, so that when the text moves focus to a time prior to the announcement, the pluperfect comes into play: *Bilbo had been [prior to the announcement] the wonder of the Shire for sixty years; the riches he had brought back . . . had now become local legend*. The structure of *had now become* glides our temporal focus over this prior time (*sixty years*) and slides it right back up against our vantage point (*now*) so that the following sentences, *it was popularly believed . . . Bag End was full of tunnels*, resume the simple past proposition of state, once again immediate to our vantage.

All of this establishes the moral framework of the argument the text will begin to make by pressing characters to *act* within this framework. We expect that Bilbo's

announcement is the commencement of moral choice, which is why the text establishes our fictive vantage point at the completion of this event. The characterizations that follow further develop the scenic premises, giving what we should expect to be detail pertinent to the moral dilemmas that will be faced by characters and to the respect of which their actions and choices will present a fictive argument.

#### 4 - Principles of Fictive Characters

Moral or ethical criticism is only possible when moral capacity is on display. Scene and situation may provide a moral framework, but it is in *choice*, in *action*, that moral capacity is demonstrated, and this can only be enacted by conscious agents with some semblance of a capacity for choice: characters. John Gardner (1983b) observes that “Character is the very life of fiction . . . . [P]lot forces the character to choice and action, [which] transforms him, from a static construct to a lifelike human being making choices and paying for them” (p. 52) so that “by our actions we discover what we really believe and, simultaneously, reveal ourselves to others” (Gardner 1983a, p. 46). In other words, the action of the story must be in service of developing *characters*, because it is those characters for which the fiction is made (and about whom our critical judgment is made). While Gardner notes that character and action are inextricably linked, he does not explicitly examine how close that link really is.

In fact, it is once more within the action, the *verbs* of the first sentence of our example, that character begins to be limned. The lexical-conceptual framework by which we understand *announce* requires an enactor of that action with a particular array of presumed mental states: the act of announcing is partly composed of the intentional

fulfillment of a desire, and only a person or creature with mental states can have intentions and desires. The syntactic role of this enactor is fulfilled by the phrase *Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End*, and so we have begun to imagine, within our fictive dream, the bare outlines of a character, and given it a *personal name*. As Chomsky (1975) notes, when “we name [an] entity with a personal name, . . . we assign it to a category of common-sense understanding, Person. . . . Given the cognitive structures, we can distinguish necessary and contingent properties” (p. 49). We assign some set of properties to this character, the same set of properties that any creature we understand to be a human being with mental states will possess by the consequence of our innate epistemological capacity. Within the subordinated phrase, the deictic pronouns must refer to this same character, according to the syntax of the sentence, which means that the character to whom we are awakening is also one who is capable not only of *celebrating*, an extended activity, but of *intending to celebrate*, which is again syntactically indicated by the verbal mood that expresses an event with potentiality but lacking initiation or completion: “many languages blur the future tense with notions of possibility and determination” because “what will happen is conceptually related to what must happen, what can happen, what should happen, and what we intend to happen” (Pinker 2007, p. 196). *Mr. Bilbo Baggins* thus acquires for our understanding a set of mental states that include intentions, desires, and agency.

As we discussed above, with the coordination of *when*, Bilbo’s *announcement* is indicated to initiate a state: it creates *much talk and excitement in Hobbiton*. Like *Bilbo*, *Hobbiton* is an unfamiliar word, but once again the syntax indicates how it is we should begin to construct the mental representation. *Talk* and *excitement* are things that only



creatures with human-like mental states engage in, and *talk* only occurs in groups of such creatures. Because *Hobbiton* is presented as a location by the preposition *in*, we can understand the location as representing a single mental state that encompasses a group of creatures with human-like mental states. As Chomsky (2000) notes, “We can regard [a city] with or without regard to its population,” describing a city either based on its physical features or the mental states of its inhabitants: “we can be talking about a location or area, people who sometimes live there, the air above it (but not too high), buildings, institutions, etc., in various combinations” (p. 37). Hence, we begin to represent *Hobbiton* as a collection of individuals, a population, about whom we can think collectively with a unified mental state.

In this first sentence of the novel, we already have story: two characters who have intentions, desires, and other mental states assigned to them by our innate lexical-conceptual framework, and who act in ways that impact upon one another: *Bilbo’s announcement* causes a change in the mental state of *Hobbiton*. This all arises out of the syntax by which units of the lexical-conceptual framework are deployed according to the script Tolkien planned out for us and entirely absent of real-world ascriptive intentions. In addition, this understanding will be more-or-less uniform among all readers sharing the human genetic heritage, and our human reactions to these characters and our moral judgment of the actions they take within the premises established comprise the kind of ethical criticism discussed in Part Three.

## 5 - Principles of Literary Metaphor

One of the features of literature that has been the most problematic for literary

criticism and understanding over the years has been literary metaphor. The best literary metaphors offer a staggeringly novel way of understanding the world, and in most cases, the sublimity of the expression seems to capture some essential truth of experience. However, our analysis of the lexical-conceptual framework suggests that all *literal* meanings are in fact *metaphorical*, in the sense that concepts do not attach to things in the world but are only ascribed to those things. Janet Burroway (2000) describes metaphor as “the literary device by which we are told that something is, or is like, something that it clearly is not, or is not exactly like” (p. 269). Yet, because the conceptual nexus within the innate framework to which words attach have no attachments to the world except according to our ascriptive intentions, there never can be a *literal* description of an object; as we discussed in Part One, we deploy aspects of the lexical-conceptual framework in order to make sense of the world. A metaphor is simply an unfamiliar and sometimes clever ascription.

Pinker (2007) finds that “our powers of analogy allow us to apply ancient neural structures to newfound subject matter, to discover hidden laws and systems in nature, and not least, to amplify the expressive power of language itself” (p. 276). This is because “Metaphors are generalizations: they subsume a particular instance in some overarching category. . . [and] like other generalizations, metaphors can be tested on their predictions and scrutinized on their merits, including their fidelity to the structure of the world” (p. 261). The fact that a metaphor is a generalization is what makes them possible: “the power of analogy . . . comes from noticing *relations* among parts” (p. 254). Hence, we can ascribe a conceptual package to some aspect of the world as a way to think about that thing. The distinction between *literal* and *metaphorical* merely arises from familiarity:

“many, if not most, conceptual metaphors are opaque to current speakers” because “people don’t dig down to a conceptual metaphor every time they understand a conventional one” (p. 248). For the *experience* of fiction, we need simply to *understand*, according to our innate capacities, the metaphoric proposition. On the other hand, a novel metaphor is one that does not match prior ascriptions that comprise a person’s prior knowledge, while a “conventional” metaphor, what might be called the *literal* use of a word, presumes, because of past ascriptions, that the properties being ascribed are essential to the object, rather than being part of the ascription. “[P]sychologists concluded that people can read through a metaphorical expression to its underlying concepts, but only when the metaphor is fresh. When the metaphor is conventional . . . , people go directly to the abstract meaning” (p. 249). Burroway (2000) provides the feature of unfamiliarity as defining the quality of a metaphor: “What a good metaphor does is surprise us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the aptness or truth of the likeness” (p. 269).

Literary metaphors, according to Pinker, “are special because they induce a sense of incongruity—a moment of frisson in which the listener puzzles over something that seems to make no sense” (Pinker 2007, p. 262). Although examples from our sample passages are not particularly puzzling, one of the examples we examined above used what we would call metaphor or figurative language as part of the establishment of fictive scene: *The flowers glowed red and golden: snap-dragons and sunflowers, and nasturtians trailing all over the turf walls and peeping in at the round windows*. Here, we don’t usually think of *flowers* as *glowing*, since flowers do not themselves ordinarily emit light. Likewise, *nasturtians* do not *peep* because they do not have eyes or a mental

state that can exhibit coyness. The usage is *figurative* in the traditional sense, but I think ordinary in the sense we have pursued in this *essai*. *Peep* and *glow* are simply different ways of construing the state of the flowers in the garden. Orson Scott Card (1990) elaborates, as advice to writers, that “early in a story, when the rules of your created world are not yet fully explained, you have to avoid metaphors that might be confusing to experienced sf readers. Later, when the rules are firmly set, your readers will know the terms that imply things that are not possible in your world should be taken metaphorically” (p. 93). But literary metaphor always relies on a set of “rules” that are determined by knowledge of the conceptual packages to which words of a language connect as learned labels. Any aspect of this knowledge can be held in abeyance, and any metaphor at all must rely on abeyant knowledge in order to have any effect in eliciting “the visual power of metaphor, [which] is as available to novelists as to poets. Often an important gesture or complex of gestures . . . cannot be captured so efficiently by any other means” (Gardner 1983b, p. 23). If the flowers *glow*, they emit light by some means, either from within as *glow* suggests or by reflection as our knowledge would provide, and there is no difference between this being figurative or literal for the experience of the fictive dream. Likewise, the *nasturtians peep*, perhaps by holding abeyant the understanding we would normally ascribe of some coy intention: when that abeyant coyness is never propositionally realized, we simply set it aside.

## 6 - Summary and Suggestion of Principles and Properties

Through our very brief examination of some of the properties of literary texts and the explanatory principles that help explain and define them, we have begun to outline

the manner by which a cognitive-formalist literary criticism might proceed. We found that the fictive dream is not like a movie, nor does it have the character of being imagistic, despite widely held assumptions. We also explained why prose in the past tense can still feel “immediate” to our reading experience, noting the explanatory principles of fictive-temporal vantage point and focus. These principles gave us the tools to describe several kinds of event sequences that a literary text could depict: serial events, where the temporal vantage point moves along with a series of actions, following the focus; and recursive events, where the vantage point remains more-or-less fixed and the focus shifts around inside an event. Likewise, the establishment of temporal vantage plays a part in establishing scene, which seems to be related to the way non-fictional arguments are put together. This might suggest that argument has a similar structure to narrative, as it seems unlikely that we would have cognitively divergent capacities to assemble or experience the propositional understanding that comprises each through language. Because verbs are rudimentary to syntax, it seems unavoidable that the many consequent properties we found for fictional texts would also obtain for argumentative non-fictional or philosophical texts, being equally comprised of linguistic-epistemological propositions. Any distinctions between argument and narrative likely lie in some other kinds of properties. In addition, we found that literary metaphor is identical to other kinds of language use, but this does not reduce their interest or power: in fact, we found a possible explanation for such power in that good metaphors are incongruous to prior experience and hence novel, offering a new way of understanding some circumstance. This isn’t new, but the explanatory mechanisms by which this description is accomplished are provided by the framework of the Scientific Cognitive

Formalism.

All such properties of fictive texts that can be generalized from our examination of the explanatory principles of the experience of the fictive text are a consequence of the Scientific Cognitive Formalism we have been developing throughout this *essai*. Importantly, however, each of these discoveries have the potential for interdisciplinary reciprocation. Psychological experiments could be formulated to test the way in which different kinds of event sequences are experienced. The ways in which argument and narrative are similar may have consequences for teaching composition and rhetoric. The concrete examination of fictional propositions in *The Lord of the Rings* likely has some application for Semantics, such as in the way in which cognitive entailments provide the meaningful scope of the lexical-conceptual framework. By these implications, literary criticism can give back to those disciplines from which it borrows.

And yet, there are countless avenues of investigation open before us as critics: we have here only begun to scratch the surface of the kinds of explanatory principles and properties that may be discovered to account for and describe the experience of reading literary texts, by which categories of experience might be developed. It is likely that many of my initial attempts fail of some insight, and further analysis and consideration will offer revisions to those first approximations. Likewise, I haven't even touched on countless aspects of the experience of reading which likewise a Scientific Cognitive Formalism has the capacity to elucidate. Rather than pursuing a criticism that "ceaselessly posits meaning" (Barthes 1968, p. 1325) without a self-correcting framework, we have instead in a Cognitive Formalism the tools to truly add to the collective understanding that humanity is capable of developing about our world, both

physical and social, and offer a robust and encompassing explanatory framework that will open up our further understanding of both the human mind and the capacities of human art, especially those of the object of our discipline, Literature.

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