

“Literary Interpretation” and Cognitive Literary Studies

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In the discussions of cognitive literary studies in this and earlier volumes of *Poetics Today*, there regularly seems to be at least a fairly broad consensus as to the significant differences between the typical literary-humanistic and the typical scientific approaches to making claims about a given object of study. Even if the object of study is the same—in this case, literature—a humanistic approach nonetheless seems to establish the validity of its claims in ways quite different from those of a scientific approach. Supporters of cognitive literary studies commonly feel that literary study can benefit from theories and practices that are more in line with the methods of science. To these scholars’ minds, we can have a reasonable blending of humanistic and scientific discourses as long as we are careful about how we bring the approaches together and about what we can expect their blending to reveal. A cognitivist approach to literary interpretation will try to base its claims on relatively solid scientific fact while not failing to treat the text as literature, which is to say as more than a product of biological processes. On the other side, as with the Hans Adler and Sabine Gross (2002) response to the recent *Poetics Today* special issue (23, no. 1 [spring 2002]), “Literature and Cognitive Revolution,” we have at least the guarded conviction that the two approaches may simply be incommensurably different. We cannot really hope for a blending that will work. The split between the “two cultures” of the sciences and the humanities that bothered C. P. Snow in 1959 remains in place.

I have written on this interdisciplinary situation in earlier issues of *Poetics Today* (Jackson 2000, 2002). Within the present exchange, I want to elaborate on some issues I have mentioned previously only in passing, and I want to conclude with what I take to be a key question for the possible new field of cognitive literary studies. I must admit at the outset that everything I say will depend upon generalized meanings of key terms that a skeptic (including me) can easily shoot down. Still, I assume that most readers of this periodical will commonly use these terms in more or less the same ways, even if they are aware, as they should be, of how indeterminate these terms can be. Further, it may seem that I am trying to stifle this emerging field just as it begins to flower. But that is not my intention. Actually, I hope to help things along by raising what I think will be unavoidable and difficult questions to answer.

Adler and Gross (2002: 198) have considered at length the term *cognitive literary criticism*, which, they write, is problematic because it “floats two qualifiers without settling the question of where the cognitive and the literary are situated vis-à-vis each other.” But I want to begin a discussion of terms at an even more fundamental level. Let us consider the meanings of *literary interpretation*. The obvious first meaning of the phrase takes *literary* to denote the object of interpretation. This understanding stresses the difference between the explanation and that which gets explained. We have an object of study known as literature, and we have a more or less systematic approach to explaining the object that is distinctly different in discursive kind from the object itself. In this most broad sense, literary interpretation bears a similarity to other kinds of argumentation, including scientific explanation. Roughly speaking, in the prevailing models of interpretation at least, you have an introduction in which you lay out some issue or question, you have a body or middle that considers in a systematic way some significant evidence in relation to the issue or question, and you have a conclusion of some kind. The argument moves according to widely accepted notions of logical analysis. As far as I can tell, this remains a nearly universal model of establishing claims. But of course I have spoken only on the most abstract level. Beyond this most general discursive similarity, the criteria for what will work as an argument in a literary-interpretive context differ rather broadly from what will work in a scientific context. It matters, though, to see that the basic similarity of argumentative formats does carry weight. It enables successful writers of literary interpretation to have a certain confidence in the validity of their claims, to take intellectual pleasure in successfully proving their point, and in an important way this confidence and pleasure will be similar to those of the scientist. We will return to the idea of confidence and pleasure below.

Needless to say, the differences between the two methods stand out much more strongly than do the similarities. But why, to begin with, should we focus on what the two approaches do and do not share? There are two primary reasons. First, given the general differences between scientific and humanistic methodologies, bringing scientific concepts or theories into literary studies cannot be simply a neutral move. The issue of how we use those imported ideas will inevitably become important. The contributors to this and the earlier special issue dealing with cognitive literary study make no claims to being *scientific* in the sense that a physicist or neurologist or even sociologist might use that word. But still, they find science-based concepts to be strongly appealing as a means of anchoring interpretation. If they bring in scientific concepts and try to use them in something like a scientific way, then will they be doing literary interpretation or some kind of science? If they bring in scientific concepts but do not use those concepts in something like a scientific way, then will they be making not just a reasonable and interesting, but a legitimate use of the concepts? For the idea of legitimacy will come up in the interdisciplinary context. Imagine a scientific writer making foundational use of some literary concept in interpreting his or her data. This is so illegitimate as to be inconceivable. But in the other direction, because humanistic studies have such broad methodological tolerances, it is at least conceivable to try to ground interpretation in a scientific concept. Nonetheless, doing so will open the doors to certain argumentative expectations that will have to be dealt with.

The second primary reason for considering the differences between scientific and literary-humanistic approaches is this. A set of critics (we will turn to them shortly) has already argued that literary theory and practice ought, one way or another, to emulate the scientific model of investigation and explanation. What these critics have had to say takes on a new relevance with the appearance of a possible cognitive literary studies. Of course, any scholar could find cognitive science just plain interesting in itself for literary research, but most of those now involved (e.g., Easterlin [1999], Hart [1998], Crane [1998], Crane and Richardson [1999], Turner [1991, 1996], Lakoff and Johnson [1999], and the writers herein) also find it appealing because they feel it will bring a new kind of rigor and legitimacy to what they see as the relativistic mess of current theory and practice. By considering scholars who have previously gone on record about rigor, legitimacy, and the current state of criticism, we will find already laid out the main positions and attitudes concerning the interdisciplinary situation.

It seems undeniable that anyone evaluating most literary publications of the past few decades through the lens of a scientific sense of argumentation will likely be unimpressed (to put it mildly). As a worthwhile example of

this, we may turn to Paisley Livingston, who has long considered the issue of literary argumentation in relation to philosophy of science. In his *Literary Knowledge* (1988), Livingston charts out some sixteen more specific versions of the most general argumentative form I have given above. From this survey he concludes that “many critics are at least implicitly engaged in work that approximates a very basic model of inquiry” (ibid.: 237). Later, he goes so far as to concede, in a kind of damning with faint praise, that “[literary] critical research sometimes manifests a rudimentary explanatory pattern that is similar, in its most basic form, to scientific explanations” (ibid.: 239). In other words, a rough kind of systematicity exists in literary discussions, systematicity of course being essential to scientific method. But then he asks how it can be that, in spite of this systematicity, most critics “produce such divergent and apparently noncumulative results? The patterns of literary explanation seem to be made and broken without there being anything remotely resembling overall progress” (ibid.: 237). How can it be that a formalized method of inquiry will not lead to a relatively unified, cumulative, and progressive kind of knowledge, as is famously the case with science? To Livingston, this seems an obvious question. But at present few literary scholars would think of their discipline as producing cumulative, progressive knowledge in the manner of the sciences and so would not find his question relevant to their work.

In a most general sense literary scholars work to produce newness of some kind. The newness will necessarily appear in relation to some already-established (old) opinion and therefore move onward or at least away from that opinion, but we do not really find the kind of steady building of new facts upon old facts that is a foundation of scientific inquiry. Scientific method produces the ability to make fairly straightforward value judgments about both explanations and that which gets explained. Later discoveries establish facts that enable us to say that earlier “facts” were wrong or false in a most definite way. Though the sciences thrive on disagreement, though there are always large and small unsettled issues, nonetheless disagreement, at least in the hard sciences, always pushes toward the goal of what amounts to universally agreed-upon facts. But again, few critics would expect this from literary studies.

Livingston knows all this but wants to persuade other students of literature to emulate more rigorously the scientific model. He takes up the objection that literary interpretation does not set out to explain in anything like the scientific sense, where explanation has to do with discovering “recurrent types or patterns of events and their lawful repetition” (ibid.: 112); rather, interpretation has to do with “the properly humanistic task . . . of *understanding*” (ibid.: 239; italics in original), and therefore judging literary interpretation by scientific explanation makes no sense. “What is wrong with

this objection," he says, "is the fuzziness and incoherence of the notion of understanding it advocates, for insofar as such understanding is truly different from explanation it does not make a good candidate for knowledge in any strong, systematic sense of the word" (ibid.). Said another way: the objection itself will not stand because it does not subscribe to the meaning of knowledge by which scientific explanation is judged. From the perspective of such knowledge, Livingston is right. But of course, to someone so committed to his position, we cannot really have simply an issue of "perspective" here. For knowledge that will count, we appear to have the one model—the scientific model—by which all others must be finally judged. However, Livingston feels his reader's concern that he may seem to be entirely devaluing the basic interpretive act of making meaning. He does, as he (ibid.: 239–40) writes,

consider the interpretation and appreciation of literary works to be a valuable activity. But it is another question whether such activities should be considered genuine research. Surely the fact that critics can "make meanings" and engage in conversations is not a sufficient answer to the question of the status of literary knowledge. Can we really speak of an alternative form of knowledge [understanding], one that can be set in opposition to explanation, when the results of these understandings are a discontinuous and noncumulative jumble?

He takes it as self-evident that what amounts to written conversations cannot produce genuine knowledge. Once again the kind of coherence and progress associated with science becomes the only standard for what constitutes genuine research and genuine knowledge across the disciplines.

As I have suggested above, many scholars who are turning to cognitive scientific approaches to literary study tend, though with many individual variations, to be one way or another aligned with Livingston's positions and attitudes. In writings by Nancy Easterlin (1999), F. Elizabeth Hart (1998), Mary Crane (1998), Mary Crane and Alan Richardson (1999), Patrick Colm Hogan (2000), Mark Turner (1991, 1996), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999), we find a general sense that literary interpretation in the past decades has become a great jumble of very weak, if not plain empty, arguments. Hogan (2000: 281), for instance, in his well-written, very useful book *Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Literature*, tries to upset what he calls the "mystique of currently prestigious literary theories" by showing those theories' argumentative weaknesses. At one point he considers the situation through the lens of analytic philosophy, which is akin to science in the rigor of its method. "Many people trained in analytic philosophy," he writes, "feel that arguments and analyses in literary theory are frequently hopelessly muddled. Such arguments often confuse necessary with sufficient conditions, sense with extension, mere consistency with logical implication, and

so on. Thus such arguments end up with mistaken or even paradoxical conclusions” (ibid.: 260). Along the way he makes the case that “cognitive science has developed into one of the most important and influential areas of research in the academy” (ibid.: 253), and “as a research program” that is just beginning, “cognitive science appears quite promising” for literary study (ibid.: 325); this, because it will bring in a much-needed analytic rigor. Hogan then includes a long discussion of what he calls “empirical poetics,” which involves directly bringing in research methods from the sciences: testability, consideration of alternative hypotheses, control group testing, statistical analysis, random sampling, systematic controlling for variables, and so forth. And just this turn to an empirical poetics seems to be the ultimate outcome of a desire to rebuild literary criticism on a science-like foundation. In contrast to most current literary theory and practice, writes Hogan, “cognitive science cannot be wholly speculative or interpretive. For cognitive science to develop in any field, theorists must have recourse to empirical research” (ibid.: 253). Raymond Tallis (1999: 90–91), another frequent evaluator of literary studies in relation to philosophy of science, has written even more forcefully about the issue of empirical research:

The lack of appropriate quantitative methods to acquire the data necessary to underpin descriptive general statements and to ensure validity of causal explanations—such as those that purport to demonstrate the political, social, cultural, economic, and internal “literary” influences on the structure and content of works of literature—lies at the heart of the present crisis in the humanities. In an age in which it is increasingly expected that general statements should be supported by robust evidence if they are to command credence, the humanities are in danger of being simply anachronistic, acceptable only to arts graduates who have known no better and are unacquainted with adequate methodological discipline.

I do not want to mischaracterize these writers. All are careful not to appear to set scientific knowledge up as somehow absolute. All wisely qualify their claims. But still, it is plain that none of them considers the conclusions of most contemporary literary theory and practice as being in the realm of what can legitimately be called knowledge, that realm being established in the last instance by scientific method. All want literary studies to produce knowledge on some kind of par with the sciences. In order for this to happen, argumentative and research procedures must be brought more in line with the criteria of scientific research. Now literary scholars who want to bring cognitive scientific concepts into their work, such as the contributors to the 2002 special issue of *Poetics Today*, will need to keep in mind this kind of evaluative position, especially given the way in which the initial appeal of cognitive scientific ideas can lead on to require empirical-

scientific backing in order to produce knowledge that matters. Presumably, any scholar who is committed to the scientific model of knowledge production would support, or at least not disallow, the idea of anchoring interpretation in cognitive science. After all, cognitive science sets out to explain through systematic empirical research the nature of mind as a function of the human biological organism. Given this, in principle we ought to be able to anchor an immense array of human attributes and behaviors in cognitive science. But again, a commitment to the scientific model will bring along an array of accompanying expectations about the nature of evidence, argument, generalization, and the like.

An example of what I mean may be found in Adler and Gross's (2002: 209) generalization about the essays collected in the earlier special issue of *Poetics Today*: "Given the role of biology as an 'orienting discipline' and the emphasis on cognitivism as a science, it is striking how little 'hard-core' brain research from fields such as neurology, neuropsychology, neurobiology, and cognitive neuroscience is represented in [the] issue's contributions." This kind of unsatisfied expectation will likely characterize not only those, such as Adler and Gross, who do not already hold that some kind of scientific model will rescue literary criticism, but those on the other side as well. The "discontinuous and noncumulative jumble" of current criticism may come to seem, to scholars committed to the scientific paradigm, even less valuable if the new interdisciplinary scholars bring in scientific concepts but otherwise just carry on with the same kinds of argumentative procedures as before.

In moving toward my question about "literary interpretation," we have all too briefly considered some similarities and differences between literary and what we may call scientific approaches to the literary text: we have discussed the *how* aspect of what a literary critic does. But now what about the nature of the object of study? I assume most people will agree that a literary text differs significantly from the kinds of objects studied by, at least, the hard sciences. Of course, any given example of a text can be considered strictly as a material object: if in paper, it can be weighed, pages counted, and so forth. And it consists of elements whose material constitution can be analyzed, say, by a chemist. But these qualities a literary text shares with any other paper texts and with any other material object. You do not really have to understand the nature of literary language to make these kinds of analyses. If we can agree that literature is fundamentally a kind of linguistic object, then if we are to distinguish literary kinds of texts from other texts, one necessary way to make the distinction will be through some generalization about their natures as linguistic objects. This of course is quite difficult, maybe impossible, to do in any final way; and yet the great majority of us,

unless we are being hyper-skeptical, readily know a literary from a nonliterary text. For one thing, a literary text's key "determinacy," that which makes it precisely a literary kind of text, consists of its intrinsic lack of determinacy. It would be a rare writer who would expect that his or her literary text can have only one meaning, regardless of the fact that the material set of words itself—the imprinted marks on the page—will be relatively fixed and permanent. The very concept of irony, which many would agree is essential to the nature of literary language, disallows anything like a determinate text in this key sense. Even if we concede the hyper-skeptical view that ultimately any and all linguistic texts must be indeterminate by virtue of (a certain understanding of) language itself, still the literary text would be a limit case of this general state of affairs. It is with this kind of object that the literary critic engages.

In contrast, science must have, at least compared to literary study, well-defined, determinate objects in order to apply itself to their explanation. This is why it matters so much to eliminate variables. Any experiment or sampling that is to have value must systematically eliminate as many variables as possible, otherwise it simply will not be clear what has been learned: "Ideally, one holds everything constant while testing one variable" (Wilson and Bowen 2001: 22). This is not to say that science does not uncover ambiguities or uncertainties, but only that the method works as best it can to constrain the object of study to very specifically determined elements; so that even if ambiguity is discovered, it, too, will be strictly constrained.¹ Given this, few scientists would waste time attempting to explain the inexactly defined phenomena of literary studies. If they were to do so and depend, as they must, upon a quantitative methodology, then we would have some kind of social science, which is the catchall term for the empirical study of psychology, culture, society, institutions. I assume that cognitive literary study will not set out to be a social science.

The literary critic, then, may employ the basic argumentative methods used by scientific explanation. But given the nature of the object of study, can we reasonably expect that a more rigorously scientific-type methodology would be applicable to its investigation? I would argue that the nature of the object of study, literature, requires that a good literary interpretation re-create, at least virtually, just that object of study; not in the sense of re-creating what we know of a material object or process in the world, not in the sense that Copernicus in a way re-created the world by displacing the earth from the center of the solar system; but in the sense that the object of study gets re-created *as* an indeterminate, or literary, text. The inter-

1. For more on the openness of literary relative to scientific investigation, see Levine 1993: 91–93.

preter weaves himself or herself into the fabric of the text in order to create a "new" text that is still a function of the original. Perhaps this is a Romantic notion of the writer and the reader. That does not make it untrue. In this sense, the entire literary-interpretive endeavor is paradoxical (both originally creative and parasitic), and I do not see how it could be otherwise. As a consequence, literary-interpretive originality partakes in a powerful way of literary originality. This is one reason why, as opposed to scientific claims, literary interpretation has no requirement that a given argument and conclusion be duplicatable (what in the scientific arena would be called testable) by other researchers in order to achieve the status of being accepted as fact. Rather, a literary interpretation's success means that its claims cannot be repeated. Once an interpretation has been successfully done, no one will even consider doing exactly the same interpretation again. And yet just this redoing, which would be plagiarism in the literary critical context, is the foundational means of validating knowledge in the scientific context.

Another way of saying this is that literary interpretive claims are not what, after Karl Popper, can be called "falsifiable." Falsification may not be the absolute criterion for rational knowledge (Hogan 2000: 318–19), but it is integral to scientific thought. Scientists advance hypotheses about some element of the world and then test hypotheses through experiment to find their falsity. The less falsifiable a hypothesis is found to be (though we can never achieve absolute unfalsifiability), the more it takes on the solidity of being a full-fledged theory. It can be tempting to describe a literary interpretation as the testing of a hypothesis—a theory (in the literary, not the scientific sense) or approach or belief—by means of an experimental bringing together of the hypothesis with a text. But for this to be true in anything like the scientific sense, the interpretation would have to have foremost in its process the *obligation* of falsifying the hypothesis. David Wilson, in *Science and Literature: Bridging the Two Cultures*, explains falsification for students of literature:

Any real test of a hypothesis or prediction must be powerful enough to refute the hypothesis. . . . It is often all too easy to design experiments that seem to confirm a hypothesis but actually are not a real test of it because there is no conceivable way for the test to disprove the hypothesis. . . . One should use the test with the greatest potential of showing that the hypothesis is incorrect. The possibility of falsification has become the hallmark of the scientific method, and good science involves testing a hypothesis at its limits. (Wilson and Bowen 2001: 22)

Though literary arguments typically must take into account at least some array of possible objections, the usual review-of-the-literature does not come close to the scientific ideas of testability and falsification. In fact, most commonly a literary interpretation stands out plainly as an example

of “‘confirmation bias,’ the universal tendency to seek out and to recognize evidence supporting strongly held beliefs, while failing to seek or even to recognize evidence contradicting those beliefs” (Hogan 2000: 336; see also Tallis 1999: 90). For Patrick Hogan and others like him, one reason scientific method towers over other means of establishing knowledge is that it has systematic, built-in protections against confirmation bias. In literary studies though, if you sign up with feminism or new historicism or postcolonial studies, not to mention psychoanalysis, you take on as an established theory what from the scientific perspective would be at best a weak hypothesis; and then one way or another you set out to find your “theory” confirmed in your chosen texts (I myself have done this more than once).

Typically, only a handful of literary scholars are willing to consider seriously objections that could falsify a given theory from the ground up. Imagine all those committed to psychoanalytic theory in its various manifestations—this is a very substantial group of scholars—having to deal directly with objections to the theory from child psychologists and from a host of linguists after Noam Chomsky. Not likely. For this and other reasons, “theory” will seem nearly as unscientific as the literature it explores. But this is a problem only if we assume the scientific model as the only way to produce knowledge that matters. Literature as an object of study seems to invite, if not to require, what from the scientific perspective will look like confirmation bias. In any case, the nature of the object of study would seem to make scientific notions of testability and falsification not very relevant.

As I have said above, the literary text depends upon interpretation in order to become itself; which is to say, to become indeterminate or polysemous by virtue of the nature of its determinate, fixed inscription. Now this is a paradoxical conclusion. In terms of the relatively rough and ready logic of humanistic discourse, however, it can be a quite compelling conclusion. But there seems little chance that it could possibly be proven in such a way that analytic-philosophical or scientific argumentative criteria would be satisfied. And yet there it is. Literature must have interpretation. Rocks or atomic particles or low-pressure weather systems or even economies do not depend on explanation in order to become what they most intrinsically are. Literature does. Further, since we are here concerned with written literature: if literature can be supposed to express meanings about the world, then written interpretation must be the strongest realization of literary meaningfulness.² Like the literary text itself, the written interpretation does not,

2. What “proof” do I have of this generalization? Nothing again that would work for science. I have my training and experience as a scholar, which means my membership in a community of scholars. My knowledge I assume to be shared by many, though of course challengeable by many as well, ignored by as many more. I have my place in a somewhat formalized system

and if it is to be literary cannot, strive for scientific kinds of certainty. Only a rare (and unpopular) critic would expect her or his well-argued interpretation to carry the kind of truth value that a scientific explanation expects. Again, this is hardly to hold that any given scientific explanation expects to be the last word or the absolute truth. And of course the case can be made that, with respect to human knowledge, the ostensibly nonlinguistic world is itself essentially polysemous, that any apparently solid meaning is always already a function of systems of representation. All certainties get produced by the exclusionary operations of desire or ideology. Therefore, rather than discovering some "true" or factual nature of its object of study, science, like literature or the arts, creates the nature of that object. But this relativistic opinion, which has been extraordinarily productive in the humanities (though of course cognitive literary scholars tend to be skeptical of the value of what has been produced), will tend to be most strongly held, precisely, by humanists rather than scientists.³ Further, any literary scholar who wants to bring cognitive science in to rejuvenate or transform literary study will have to be acutely aware of what it means to hold that facts, truth, value, and the like are purely functions of ideology. For if scientific methods and claims are just as ideological as literary-interpretive methods and claims, then cognitive science is no better or worse an anchor for interpretation than anything else. Unless the "facts" of cognitive science are of a fundamentally different kind than the "facts" of current literary interpretation, why bring the science in at all?

Adler and Gross (2002: 214) address the question of why cognitivist analyses often end up being "less than exhilarating" for students of literature. This is because, they write, the literary analysis that is practiced by and appeals to most literary scholars is not ashamed to be "speculative," to set out "to argue rather than to 'solve'" in the manner of scientific argument. I would agree but would state the case more fundamentally: literary analysis is not ashamed to be literary. Since literary interpretation nearly always uses conventional argumentative methods in some way to "prove" a point

of knowledge validation, known as the discipline of English. But in terms of scientific rules, these are only ad hoc bases for my claims. (To prove the claim that *only* written interpretation can bring the literary text to its "full" existence as literature would take me too far from the present topic and would be even more unscientific.)

3. This has been the "constructivist" (I would call it relativist) attack on scientific, positivistic, or more generally Platonic notions of truth, objectivity, and knowledge. Another way of thinking about these interdisciplinary issues is in terms of the seemingly unavoidable either-or of relativism/constructivism and Platonism. I myself have discussed this directly (Jackson 2000). Perhaps the most balanced and hopeful accounting of the either-or is N. Katherine Hayles's "Constrained Constructivism: Locating Scientific Inquiry in the Theater of Representation" (1993).

that at one and the same time emerges from and makes manifest the indeterminacy of the determinate object of study, literary interpretation in a relatively unique way partakes of the nature *of* its object of study. A scientific explanation can possibly prove the indeterminacy of some object or process in the world. But the proof is not the same as with literary interpretation (and I did not therefore feel the need to put scare quotes around “prove” with respect to science). The proof in the scientific claim makes a determinate statement about an indeterminate state of affairs in the nonlinguistic universe. To make a determinate statement about an indeterminate state of affairs in the linguistic universe is a different kind of claim. Obviously, anyone—a linguist, a philosopher, a lawyer, someone in an everyday conversation—can make a determinate statement about an indeterminacy in the world of language. But once again, this is not the same as with a literary interpretation, because of the essentially indeterminate nature of literary language. That is, a literary interpretation, if we are allowed to distinguish it as a distinct kind of interpretation, *joins in* with the literariness of the text. Literary interpretation is a peculiar and, I would say, unique *conjunction* of argument and literature, analytic approach and art form being analyzed.

This conjunction seems to be what removes literary explanations from the world of serious or real or legitimate knowledge, at least in the eyes of those who take the scientific model as generally paradigmatic. To turn to Livingston (1988) once again, we read that in most contemporary criticism, which he calls “megaphone criticism,” the literary “work is an oracle to be interpreted, but the oracle finds its place within the brackets of fiction.” Though this claim seems to ignore a lot of the more heavily political interpretive approaches, nonetheless literary texts, it seems to me, do carry a kind of oracular quality. Their first appeal is to be interpreted, and yet their textual nature carries a certain fundamental undecidability, such that the interpretation can never at the time of its expression be quite certain, never quite an exact transformation of one set of words into another. Many literary scholars find just this situation to be quite a challenging and rewarding one.⁴ But for Livingston, this cannot be an aim of real knowledge because the critic is not necessarily concerned with the accuracy or validity of the message, but just with its meaning. Continuing the quote above, he writes: “To make the accuracy or inaccuracy of the message the explicit and guid-

4. In the context of complex contemporary kinds of interpretation, this can imply that there must be a priesthood endowed with the right to interpret for everyone else. This regularly occurring charge seems true in one sense. Much too often literary scholars do not choose, or in the worst case are not able, to write for a reasonably wide audience, thus by default if not intent maintaining an overly exclusive preserve of those in the know. But the charge is false in that at least most of the priests are busy trying to teach all comers the secrets of their skills.

ing goal of criticism would be to abandon [the] aesthetic premise, which seems to dictate that the only validity in question here is that of the critic's own account of the message" (ibid.: 234). No doubt, a given interpretation could conceivably address the issue of the accuracy of the text's "message," but Livingston is largely correct about the aesthetic nature of the interpretive activity and the importance of the critic's own account.⁵ This is what I meant above by the interpreter's weaving himself or herself into the original text in order to produce a "new" text. Hillis Miller (1993: 166) states this even more bluntly: "the one who interprets fictions becomes a fiction and a maker of fictions." Given this, if we do not assess literature by scientific method, then should we do so with the interpretation of literature?

In the literary interpretive case, then, we find much less difference between the explanation and that which is being explained than we do in the scientific case. I always tell my students as they struggle to learn the work of written literary interpretation: a literary text can only be as good (or great) as its most disciplined and creative reader. *Disciplined* in this case has to do with an unavoidable set of roughly formalized rules of argumentation, uses of evidence, awareness of the existing context of written interpretations, other literary texts, and so on. *Creative* has to do with a kind of imaginative engagement that is, in the best literary criticism, quite closely related to the relatively undisciplined, very subjective quality of literary creativity itself.

To conclude, we must understand the most common use of the term *literary interpretation* dialectically, which is to say in two ways at once. *Literary* refers to the kind of text being interpreted. But it also refers to the kind of interpretation being performed. An interpretation is literary if it conjoins with the literary text so as to bring out in a determinate way the text's indeterminacy by revealing the critic's own account of literary meaning.⁶ An outcome of all this is that literary interpretation falls somewhere in between ("inter") straightforward logical explanation and literature itself. The same would hold for other, similar terms, such as *literary studies*, for example. The pleasure of writing a successful interpretation partakes of this same in-

5. Elsewhere Livingston (1993: 143) writes: "It is important to note that writing and publishing elaborate elucidations of the meanings of literary works is best understood as an aesthetic activity, the underlying assumption of which is that an important way to experience the value of a literary work is to develop, write up, and publish a detailed interpretation of it." Though Livingston might not include, say, new historical approaches in this description, I myself would.

6. In contrast to *literary interpretation*, the phrase *scientific explanation* cannot be taken (except perhaps if used in a literary text) in this dialectical manner. *Scientific* refers only to the kind of explanation, not also to what is being explained. We could possibly have a scientific explanation of science, but we would have to name the operation in just this way, as we would not with literary interpretation.

betweenness. The critic gets at one moment both the pleasure of creating a “new” imaginative work and the pleasure of having mastered an argumentative skill.⁷ But I would be correct as well in the previous sentence to put quotes around “argumentative.” For, viewed from the paradigm of scientific explanation, the argument is as virtual as is the new literary text.

I may have lain all this out too simply, may have drawn categories too broadly, but still, many literary scholars (and scientists too, for that matter) will tend to see the situation in just these broad terms. Given all this, apart from the questions I have asked along the way, here is my central question for those who would bring together the cognitive sciences and literary study. Can you make a legitimate use of the science without requiring literary interpretations to be judged by the criteria of scientific method? Said differently, how can cognitive science be blended with the study of literature in such a way as to preserve the dialectical meaning of *literary interpretation*? For if this blend cannot be achieved with that basic dialectic intact, then work may get done, some publication may happen, and a new kind of criticism may occur; but it will not appeal to most literary scholars. I do not see how it could begin to revolutionize the critical scene. On the other hand, if this blending can be done and the dialectic preserved, then it may well be the turning of a new tide in the study of literature and the humanities.

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7. And of course we should not whitewash this being “inter.” There is a down side: the critic does not get the singularly rich pleasure of *either* the scientist or the literary writer.

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