Interpreting Literary Texts

Interpreting Literary Texts:

A Post-Kantian Approach

By

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Dedication

For Rosaria Butterfield, Alisa Childers, Becket Cook, Jonathan Pageau, Tim and Jon at *Bible Project*, Jeff and Elisha at *So Be It!* and all Jews and Christians who understand the art of interpreting texts.

Definition

A text is anything that conveys meaning. It is not only the oral, written, or printed word. It can come from anywhere in the literary, visual, or performing arts. It can be made by nature or by humans. It can be individual or communal. It exists anywhere along the cultural spectrum, high, low, or hybrid. It is anything that can be looked at and explored. If it provides information—if conclusions can be drawn from it—it is a text.

Text

Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

—Zechariah 8.23

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INTRODUCTION

This book begins with a thought experiment. Readers are asked to imagine themselves as students on a tour of their state or national art gallery. Each student has been given a list of questions to consider as they progress through the rooms dedicated to different periods of art history:

- Why were these paintings curated to hang in this gallery?
- Why did the curators group them into different rooms?
- Does each group have distinct characteristics or qualities?
- What do these characteristics or qualities suggest?
- Does each group have a collective purpose or meaning?
- If it does, what does this purpose or meaning signify?

If these questions are too large and complex for an art gallery tour, at least students have entered the art world, obtained a glimpse of art history, and perhaps learned something about framing study questions.

In the rooms dedicated to modern painting, students may notice that Picasso's realist *Portrait of Aunt Pepa* (1896) looks different from the abstraction of *Guernica* (1937). A similar transition may be noticed beyond painting, in the literary arts. White's first novel *Happy Valley* (1939) is quite different from his last one *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). Beyond literature, in the performing arts, Beethoven's early symphonies sound more classical than romantic, while ballet began in the renaissance before developing classical, romantic, and modern styles. In fact, classical dance is a relatively modern invention.

Looking back over a life of studying literary texts in a discipline called "Romantics to the Present", one memory is indelible. The tutor who marked most of my essays made the same comment on each: "This novel explores a modern sense of the tension between classical and romantic imaginaries." The comment suggested a distinction between imagination and reality. If the classical and romantic are "imaginary", is the modern also "imaginary" or is it more "real" in some essential or existential sense?

This was in the 1980s, before critical theory changed the way literature was interpreted to follow the more radical forms of reader response. The revolution had yet to reach my department, which still emphasised "close reading", a method of discovering how literary texts operated as self-contained, self-referential art objects. Close reading was thought to provide a brake on what the reader could claim the text was saying and doing, but it was not without biases (all textual interpretation is influenced by the reader's biases). My tutor represented the prevailing biases of the secular Humanities.

Another indelible memory was a tutorial on Muriel Spark, the Scottish author known to be a half-Jewish convert to Catholicism. As no other student dared, I mentioned the subject of Spark as a Catholic author whose novels encoded a Catholic worldview. It seemed a harmless observation, like noticing she was Scottish, but the tutor refuted it. "There is no God in Spark's novels," she pantomimed solemnly with appropriate hand gestures: "Her novels are above God, behind God, around God, without God."

Whatever was happening here—and a *lot* was happening—it was pointless arguing with the gatekeeper, but I did wonder what was lurking behind the gate. It was odd, denying Spark's Catholicism to protect the department's critical ethos, whether Historical-Critical, Formalist, Structuralist, Poststructuralist, Marxist, Feminist, whatever. In another tutorial she was comfortable noticing *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as a satire of Presbyterianism in Edinburgh but was uncomfortable with a close reading that noticed the novel's theology.

In my close reading, Jean Brodie represents evil in modern form. During one of the novel's turning points, Sandy Stranger gazes into Jean's eyes, recognises a similar evil potential in herself, and reacts by becoming Jean's nemesis. Sandy becomes an enclosed nun, Sister Helena, who writes an odd book of strange psychology, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace", and gives spiritual direction while desperately clutching the bars of her grille. To read *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* closely is to notice the tensions between the classical and romantic imaginaries, from an anti-modernist Catholic perspective so subtle it is easily overlooked.

Spark's novels consider the theological aspects of the human condition. The secular Humanities of the 1980s, with

its obsession with reason and enlightenment, would not or could not discuss those aspects. It had invested all its resources in framing the curriculum to reflect their worldview and was guarding its investment. Questions about Spark's worldview cannot be summarily dismissed by a department's preferred worldview, however, as Kermode admits in "Freedom and Interpretation", his 1992 Oxford Amnesty Lecture:

> My own view is that as with the power of the state, we owe the author's meaning just the degree of deference due by reason of our acceptance of the rational freedom the text confers. Derrida has called the literal sense a guard rail; it prevents us from saying some things and also enables us to say what is not nonsense. And it is important not to talk nonsense about texts, either by distorting them to fit anterior assumptions or by supposing that having, by a process of sudden enlightenment, got rid of those assumptions, one has won the right to say anything that comes into one's head (67–68).

My tutor was willing to admit the subtleties of Spark's satire of Scottish Presbyterianism when they reinforce her worldview but refused to admit Spark's Catholic subtleties when they challenged her (or simply went over her head). After Barthes declared the author dead, as Nietzsche declared God dead, readers were wary of looking to an author's life or intentions. This does not render the life or the intentions irrelevant. Readers owe them some degree of deference. The author wrote the text, the reader did not.

Belief in a distinction between imagination and reality is powerful. So is the belief that "literary" novels explore the modern sense of a tension between classical and romantic imaginaries. If these beliefs are traceable to what has been happening in the Anglosphere since the eighteenth century, they can also be regarded as ancient.

The distinction between imagination and reality is inherited from the ancient Greek distinction between mimesis (imitating, showing, performing) and diegesis (explaining, telling, narrating). Both are styles of fiction which relate to the audience or reader in different ways. Mimesis acts, performs, and externalises. Diegesis speaks, comments, and internalises. From these styles a further distinction is inherited, between fiction (broadly construed as art) and non-fiction (broadly construed as life). These distinctions originate in metaphysical

thinking about the structure of reality and the nature of truth.

Plato distinguished between material things and their essences in his Theory of Forms. He believed art imitates a material thing rather than its essence—its idea—which remains in his Theory of Forms beyond the power of art. He banned the poets (artists) from his ideal republic because their imitations were copies of copies, shadows of shadows, which traded in lies and slanders about the gods, a view that parallels the ancient Hebrew ban on visual representations of God. He believed philosophy was more important than poetry because it deals with ideas while poetry deals with illusions, thus delimiting poetry's ability to represent reality, the essence of which—in his view—cannot be expressed in art.

Aristotle, his student, also believed all art is imitation; however, he tempered Plato's harsh perceptions of mimesis by viewing it as the imitation of action, neither philosophical nor moral. Mimesis is not preaching or teaching but it can provide context for learning. It is imitating what is present or past (things as they are or were), what is generally believed (things as they are thought or said to be), and what is ideal (things as they ought to be). Mimesis has a humanising effect; it evokes feelings and provides moral lessons. In *Poetics* (c.335 BC) he describes principles for Tragedy and Epic Poetry, influential until the eighteenth-century.

For Aristotle, art (a text) should imitate life (a reality) and the imitation should have verisimilitude, should correspond with a truth external to the text. Art imitates worldview (weltangschauung), or sense perceptions, a framework of assumptions about what the world is like. The framework is teleological. In philosophy and theology, teleology explains phenomena by their purpose, goal, design, raison d'être.

Aristotle used the term telos to refer to the final cause of a natural entity or mimetic text. In other words, the teleology of signs—their telos—is to signal or signify. Just what the telos signals or signifies, the meaning of the framework, depends on the correspondence theory of truth, by which the truth of a natural phenomenon or mimetic text depends on whether it corresponds with a truth external to the phenomenon or text.

The teleology is called Aristotelian rather than Platonic because Aristotle disagreed with Plato about confining the essences of ideas to the Theory of Forms. Aristotle did not

separate form from matter, as Plato did, making Aristotle the father of empiricism and Plato the father of idealism. The distinction between Plato and Aristotle is still hotly debated. Nevertheless, believing that the essences of ideas can be reified—made real—is hubris akin to Icarus flying too close to the sun, Pandora opening her box, or violating the ancient Hebrew injunction against representing God visually, as He tells Moses in Exodus 33.20: "You shall not be able to see my face, for no human can see Me and live."

Despite these warnings, the Church increasingly stressed the depiction of God's humanity in Christ. After the drama of Byzantine Iconoclasm was resolved, these depictions became more sophisticated during the Romanesque and Gothic Periods, particularly after Medieval Scholasticism rediscovered Aristotle and absorbed his teleology. By the High Renaissance, a new learning emerged, a Humanism focused on reviving and surpassing the achievements of Classical Greece. Raphael's frescos in the papal apartments, La Stanza della Segnatura, commissioned by Julius II, are preeminent representations of this new learning.

The frescos unite classical learning and Church teaching by treating human and theological knowledge equally. They describe the four branches of human knowledge on four walls. On one wall is Philosophy, which at the time included the Sciences. In *The School of Athens* (1509–1511), Plato points to the heavens, to his Theory of Forms, while Aristotle extends his hand horizontally to suggest that, while philosophical knowledge is the knowledge of ideas (rationalism), a more balanced knowledge must also consider the material world (empiricism). On the opposite wall Aristotle also appears in the fresco for Theology. In *Disputation over the Most Holy Sacrament* (1509–1510), he is in the lower right-hand corner of the earthly realm, wearing the same robes as in *The School of Athens*.

The frescos make a statement and invite a response. One response is to view them as representations of a civilisation's worldview in a specific period in the history of ideas. Another is to view them as representations of the painter's technical proficiency in a specific period in the history of art. Another is to view them as political statements of a Church seeking to buttress its spiritual authority and temporal power (the

Reformation was imminent).

In the history of art—visual, performing, literary—form and content keep changing. These changes are meaningful and serve a purpose. They are rejected as ephemeral or received as enduring through a dynamic process, sometimes called canonisation, which is always to some degree ideological. As Randisi once said of Spark in *On her way rejoicing* (1991), "The relationship between form and content is paradoxical. Form is made possible by content, just as content takes shape through form" (18). This relationship applies to literature as well as painting. Failing to notice it is why my tutor could not recognise the subtlety of Spark's anti-modernism.

New movements in art are not universally welcomed. Take for example the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Dickens found their painting mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting. Others were offended by paintings such as Rossetti's *Ecce e Ancilla Domini!* and Millais's *Christ in the House of His Parents* because they treated sacred subjects in ways that seemed profane. Rossetti broke with iconographic norms by portraying the Virgin Mary as a bewildered young woman receiving fearful news (as she was) rather than the conventional iconography of a serene receptacle of grace meditating on her missal. Millais broke with those same norms by portraying the Holy Family as first century working-class *technē* (as they were).

The Brotherhood opposed the dominance of the Royal Academy, which advocated a narrow range of idealised moral subjects and conventional definitions of beauty. They believed painters from the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries offered a more direct, uncomplicated depiction of the human body, and nature, realistically not idealistically. This theme of returning to a better model—pursuing realism instead of idealism, recovering a lost unity or wholeness, fixing what has become broken or breaking with convention to create a context for something else—is strong in the transition from classical to romantic to modern to postmodern.

Some modern art generated incredulity and hostility among those who disliked it for whatever reason. A good example of this is the infamous 1944 case against William Dobell and the Trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW, adjudicated

in the New South Wales supreme court. Dobell's entry—*Portrait of an Artist (Joshua Smith)*—had won the Archibald Prize for Portraiture in 1943. The case, brought by two fellow entrants disaffected by Dobell's success, revolved around the distinction between portraiture and caricature (a distinction about realism in art). Dobell used distortion and exaggeration to capture the essence of his subject, thus creating an image not merely copying one. He broke with convention and created public interest and debate about the definition of portraiture (and art generally).

The Dobell case was about how a painting (a text) ought to be interpreted, an attempt to use judicial power to determine what the text means. One paradox about the case is that Smith looked increasingly like Dobell's portrait as he aged. In other words, while the portrait has abstracted elements, it still has verisimilitude (lifelikeness), it is still representational. Dobell was an excellent draughtsman who learned to draw the human form at the Julian Ashton Art School. His use of abstraction as an aid to realism falls under the rubric of knowing the rules of composition and when to break them. Knighted for his formidable contribution to painting, Dobell went on to win two more Archibald Prizes during his lifetime but was scarred by the 1944 case and never fully recovered.

What about non-representational texts, those without lifelikeness or verisimilitude, which avoid representations of anything external to the text? How can they be interpreted through the reference conventions of language, literacy, and values? What kinds of meaning are conveyed unmediated by signs or signals? Abstractionists broke with convention to create a different kind of textuality, under the same rubric of knowing the rules before breaking them. Most abstractionists trained as representational painters before moving in non-representational directions purposefully and resolutely.

For example, abstract expressionist Mark Rothko claimed to only be interested in expressing basic human emotions like tragedy and ecstasy. He once said those who "weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them" and those who focus on interpreting what he is doing—exploring the relationship of colour to form—are missing the point. He is indeed exploring the relationship of colour to form but does not want his art to be intellectualised.

Interpreting a work is not the same as experiencing it. The former should not be prioritised over the latter.

Australian Abstractionist, Charlie Sheard, also wants his art to be experienced rather than interpreted. His recent book *The Music of Pure Abstraction* (2022) is a retrospective of his career as an artist and a teacher of fine art. Fluid and boldly coloured forms are intentionally arranged. They convey a sense of purpose.

All attempts to interpret Sheard's sense of purpose through the mimetic lens of *Poetics*—or metaphysics generally—are foiled by his insistence that his art is not narrative. He takes great pains to avoid any hint of narrativity in his painting, excluding all signs or signals that might suggest story-telling. The idea of painting as a narrative art is "just a conceit", as he explains:

> Painting is only narrative if the viewer already knows the story, or if the story is being explained to the viewer, in words, at the time of viewing. "Narrative Painting" can only illustrate something already known. Although painting has often been representational, her representations are not narratives. The experience represented in traditional painting is symbolic and/or allegorical experience, but painting is deeper than mere representation (140).

This is not to suggest Sheard's paintings are meaningless, it suggests their meaning comes from internal communication within the frame not from external communication about symbolic and/or allegorical experience.

Therefore, a central mimetic principle of *Poetics*—that a text should represent an aspect of reality corresponding with a truth external to the text—does not help the viewer interpret Sheard's abstractions. It is crucial to notice this, as Aristotle's influence over the Western worldview was normative until the eighteenth century. Pure Abstraction, as non-representational art, is incomprehensible to those who believe all art is (or should be) representational.

In "The History of European Painting as pre-history to Abstraction", Sheard describes his intentions and reveals his influences. While he has always been an abstractionist, he has pursued pure abstraction since 2007. This pursuit follows his "interest in the history and continuity of painting from the earliest prehistory until the present time" (140).

To Sheard, all of painting's essential elements were present in prehistoric cave painting, as the "direct transmission of bodily experience, unmitigated through thought, but related to painting on the human body" (140):

> Experts argue endlessly on the meaning, context and intention of these [cave] paintings, but the meaning is clear, as carried in the work itself: the moods and the mystery of being, the revelation of the artistic process; cycles of Nature, fear and awe, fertility and death. These paintings were hidden and forgotten for tens of thousands of years, unseen from the time of making until the twentieth century. The accompanying ritual elements, the music and the poetry, are lost.
>
> The art of ancient Greece is simply a refinement of the same impetus. The Greek temple is a man-made cave in which the Goddess or the God manifests. Greek paintings and sculptures are singular for the embodied physical energy they carry. Greek sculpture has been especially important to the history of painting because the Greek sculptors mastered the art of transmitting bodily energy into stone, which they sent on to the future. For this reason, their work has long been the very model of how to draw. The sculptures which have had the most lasting impact on my own work are the Hellenistic friezes from the Pergamon altar, which I have been going to see regularly since the 1980s (when the Pergamon Museum was still in East Berlin), and Classical sculptures such as the Aegina friezes in Munich (140).

Sheard wants to reproduce the prehistoric transmission of bodily experience unmediated by thought. This is a difficult and monumental undertaking; because pure abstraction is separated from prehistoric transmission by thousands of years of historic transmission; and because the history of art parallels the history of ideas (they are joined at the hip). The dialectic of philosophy and aesthetics—"the old quarrel" between Plato and the Poets—is never far away and cannot be unseen or unheard. Sheard concedes this when he writes: "The history of European Art has been the history of responding to ancient Greek forms" (142).

Those ancient Greek forms are inseparable from their context. The Pergamon altar, commissioned by Eumenes II in the second century BC, is not only a sign of the sculptor's proficiency. It signals a cosmology and represents political power. The Aegina friezes, sculpted in the fifth century BC,

narrate the myth of the Trojan war. There are different friezes in the east and west pediments, dated to within a ten-year period (490–480 BC). Their genius, apart from how their narratives adapt to the confines of their pediments, is how they differ. As art historians have noticed, both pediments narrate the same story, but the west is more archaic and the east has classical elements. The origins of classical style can be traced to this historical moment.

From the perspective of pure abstraction, the question is whether the skill of the sculptor can be isolated from the narrative of the sculpture and be considered in isolation, to show how historic and prehistoric transmission differ, or guess what they have in common (since, by definition, the prehistoric is speculative). Sheard might express this another way and ask whether the sculptures can be viewed as bodily experience unmediated by thought (independent of narrative). If the goal is to isolate the artist's skill from its narrative significance, the question must also be asked of Raphael's La Stanza della Segnatura frescos and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescos, because both were painted at the same time.

The question here is about signs and signals—what they are for, what their telos does—and whether knowledge or truth can be mediated without telos. All ancient Greek texts are predicated on the reality of Pagan theogony; the Pergamon altar describes the theogonic drama of Zeus and Athena. All Christian texts are predicated on the reality of Israel's God; the frescos of Raphael and Michelangelo describe the theological drama of Christian belief. As Sheard intentionally avoids the telos of signs and signals—Pagan, Christian, and presumably Jewish also—his sense of telos is communicated as absence.

Without forcing Sheard into an ideological mould, another way to express what he means is intuiting bodily experience as embodiment—what feminists call "writing on the body"—and how it relates to the "immanent critique" of metaphysics after Kant. While they performed the immanent critique, Continental philosophy and aesthetics interrogated Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, found their metaphysical system "disembodied", and followed Hegel and Marx down the materialist path, before finally arriving at the Nietzschean perspectivism now hegemonic in the West. Those who perform

the immanent critique are concerned to declare "disembodied" any "transcendent signified" which does not fit their idea of embodiment, including the "transcendent signified" known as God or the Good.

One consequence of Cultural Marxism displacing the historical role of metaphysics—by institutional capture in its Long March through the Institutions—has been the loss of a cultural grammar to describe the transcendent. Iris Murdoch explores this problem in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970):

> It seems to me that the idea of the transcendent, in some form or another, belongs to morality: but it is not easy to interpret. As with so many of these large elusive ideas, it readily takes on forms which are false ones. There is a false transcendence, as there is a false unity, which is generated by modern empiricism: a transcendence which is in effect simply an exclusion, the relegation of the moral to a shadowy existence in terms of emotive language, imperatives, behaviour patterns, attitudes. "Value" does not belong inside the world of truth functions, the world of science and factual propositions. So it must live somewhere else. It is then attached somehow to the human will, a shadow clinging to a shadow. The result is the sort of dreary moral solipsism which so many so-called books on ethics purvey. An instrument for criticizing false transcendence, in its many forms, has been given to us by Marx in the concept of alienation. Is there, however, any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky? (57)

For Murdoch, a measure of whether any idea of transcendence is true or false is its ability to survive the interrogations of Cultural Marxism. This does not mean all interpreters are Cultural Marxists, it means Cultural Marxism now controls the context in which interpretation occurs.

Those who perform the immanent critique intend to undermine the foundation of metaphysics itself. For example, Gilles Deleuze believes Plato's idealism, his rationalism, was a calculated response to an Athenian democracy where anyone could make truth claims about anything. Thus Plato's project was about restoring a "criteria of selection among rivals", as he explains:

> It will be necessary for [Plato] to erect a new type of transcendence, one that differs from imperial or mythical transcendence (although Plato makes use of myth by giving it

> a special function). He will have to invent a transcendence that can be exercised and situated within the field of immanence itself. This is the meaning of the theory of Ideas [Forms]. And modern philosophy will continue to follow Plato in this regard, encountering transcendence at the heart of immanence as such. The poisoned gift of Platonism is to have introduced transcendence into philosophy, to have given transcendence a plausible philosophical meaning (the triumph of the judgment of God). This enterprise runs up against numerous paradoxes and aporias, which concern, precisely, the status of the *doxa* (*Theataetus*), the nature of friendship and love (*Symposium*), and the irreducibility of an immanence of the earth (*Timaeus*).
>
> Every reaction against Platonism is a restoration of immanence in its full extension and in its purity, which forbids the return of any transcendence. The question is whether such a reaction abandons the project of a selection among rivals, or on the contrary, as Spinoza and Nietzsche believed, draws up completely different methods of selection. Such methods would no longer concern claims as acts of transcendence, but the manner in which an existing being is filled with immanence (the Eternal Return as the capacity of something or someone to return eternally). … In truth, only the philosophies of pure immanence escape Platonism, from the Stoics to Spinoza or Nietzsche (Deleuze 1997, 137).

For Deleuze, sneering at Plato's Theory of Forms is obligatory, and his reference to "the triumph of the judgment of God" is an obligatory sneer at Judaism and Christianity. At the heart of the immanent critique is the underlying assumption that metaphysics is false simply because it is metaphysical. But questions must still be asked: Why is Plato's transcendence a "poisoned gift" only pure immanence can escape from? What is pure immanence? Is it related to pure abstraction? Is all representation poisonous? Is Aristotle's transcendence also a poisoned gift, like Plato's? And why is metaphysics so resilient, even as the intellectual and managerial classes—manoeuvring the semiotic levers of institutional power—constantly assert its falseness?

In *After Virtue* (1981), Alasdair MacIntyre argues that when modernity made its assaults on an older world its most astute exponents knew Aristotelianism had to be overthrown, since it was the most powerful mode of pre-modern moral thought (118). Further, "If a premodern view of morals and politics is

to be vindicated against modernity, it will be in *something like* Aristotelian terms or not at all." MacIntyre believes the most powerful modern contender to Aristotle is Nietzsche, whose achievement is to understand "more clearly than any other philosopher—certainly more clearly than his counterparts in Anglo-Saxon emotivism and continental existentialism—not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems this posed for moral philosophy" (113).

Nietzsche never referenced Aristotle explicitly, except in aesthetic questions, yet a Nietzschean interpretation of the history of morality makes it clear that the Aristotelian account of ethics and politics "would have to rank for Nietzsche with all those degenerate disguises of the will to power which follow from the false turn taken by Socrates" (117). Noticing this is important, because so much of the immanent critique has revolved around—indeed, has depended upon—the idea that Socrates had a flawed understanding of rationality.

This idea is seen in Nietzsche's thinking about philosophy before Plato. It is also seen in his thinking about Tragedy before Euripides introduced Socratic rationalism to Tragedy, which had the supposed effect of disrupting what was—until then—a perfect marriage of Apollonian and Dionysian forces. This thinking must forever remain hypothetical, as Socrates is only known second hand through posthumous accounts, mainly from his students Plato and Xenophon. Philosophy before Socrates is only available in fragments, which means its concept of rationality cannot be studied systematically.

Despite the methodological limitations, Nietzsche inspired a lot of modern and postmodern scholarship which seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle—the philosophy and aesthetics of Classical Greece (510–323 BC)—effaced or erased a holistic archaic unity of word and thing (signifier and signified). The idea that Socratic rationalism and Platonic idealism are responsible for effacing or erasing a utopian lost wholeness is powerful but chimerical. Nietzsche's fundamental ambiguity, there from the beginning, has allowed him to be appropriated and adapted to meet diverse and often antithetical needs. He is a screen onto which almost anything can be (and has been) projected.

In *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1992), Jürgen Habermas—a

disciple of the Frankfurt School—describes tensions within the immanent critique. The basic condition of philosophising changed after Kant, with the first generation of Hegel's disciples, since then there has been no alternative to post-metaphysical thinking (29). While Platonism, Aristotelianism, rationalism, and empiricism lasted for millennia, things move faster today: "Philosophical movements are phenomena of effective history. They mask the constant pace of academic philosophy, which with its long rhythms stands athwart the more rapid shifts in issues and schools" (4). The effect becomes more progressive as it accelerates, as he explains:

> As early as the twenties, Western Marxism entered into a symbiosis with Freudian metapsychology, and this served as the inspiration for the interdisciplinary works of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research once it had emigrated to New York. There are in this respect similarities with a structuralism that has spread radially outward via Bachelard's critique of science, Levi-Strauss' anthropology, and Lacan's psychoanalysis. Yet, while Marxist social theory regrouped as pure philosophy in Adorno's negative dialectics, structuralism was only brought completely into the domain of philosophical thought by those who wished to overcome it—Foucault and Derrida (5).

In other words, Marxism was able to appropriate Freudianism for its cultural program but could not appropriate structuralism after the arrival of Foucault and Derrida. Their influence meant it was only a matter of time before structuralism and poststructuralism warred over meaning in the textualities of language, ideology, philosophy, art, and life.

Within structuralism, humans are intrinsically linguistic. They are meaning-producing and use language to produce meaning. They exist in a real world of ideas which rest upon a bedrock of social and economic relationships which express rational universal truths that can be known and explained. Within poststructuralism, all meanings are fluid rather than fixed. They are contextual and depend on observed differences in social and cultural phenomena. Poststructuralists do not believe there are real worlds, or rational universal truths, and all hegemonies based on dominant meanings must be resisted (particularly if they express false transcendence).

As Jacques Lacan—the French Freud—declared with authority: *l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage* (the

unconscious is structured like a language). Lacan believed structuralism must carry Freudian metapsychology—the study of mental processes and the mind–body binary apart from what can be studied experimentally—into the future, because he saw psychoanalysis as the only bulwark against the return of religion and scientism. All the major French philosophers who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s—poststructuralist and deconstructionist—attended his seminars and digested Freud via his influential (if dogmatic) teaching.

Is the unconscious really structured like a language? In a 1963 interview with Kermode, Spark was sceptical of all attempts to systematise the unconscious and warned against attempting to colonise it: "let the unconscious take care of itself, if it exists, which we don't know. If we knew it, it wouldn't be the unconscious." While the truth of Spark's warning is indisputable, it is anathema to those committed to metapsychology as it raises questions about Freudianism; on what basis it can be regarded as scientific; the degree to which it is a source of abuse and harm.

Foucault and Derrida are compelling and confronting. Foucault for his description of the nexus between knowledge and power, and how they are used for institutional control in families and societies. Derrida for his dictum *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, often translated "there is nothing outside the text", and often taken to be a nihilistic rejection of all signs and signals that suggest meaning, particularly the transcendent signified suggesting God or the Good.

A less nihilistic but still confronting translation of Derrida's dictum is "there is no outside text", which simply means there is no commentary or Midrash to assist interpreters interpret the text. This resembles Sheard's insistence that meaning comes from internal communication within the text not from external communication about its symbolic or allegorical meaning. Meaning proceeds from the inside not the outside.

This tension between meanings produced from within and meanings imposed from without is relevant to the relationship between structuralism and the immanent critique, as Habermas explains:

> Wherever the impulses of Western Marxism have not lost their [emancipatory] force, its production takes on stronger social scientific and professional philosophical characteristics [while]

> poststructuralism presently seems to be absorbed in a critique of reason radicalized through Nietzsche. [Thus], while analytic philosophy is itself overcoming itself, and phenomenology is unravelling, in these latter cases the end comes with the turn either to science or to *Weltanschauungen* (5–6).

The tension here is the loss of a cultural consensus about rationality, as the dominant culture has rejected rationality's metaphysical meanings. To say the critique of reason has been radicalised through Nietzsche is to say the West has followed Alice through the looking glass and encountered Humpty Dumpty. When she challenges him about whether words really can be made to mean whatever he wants them to mean, he tells her the only goal is to be Master. This is a reminder of what Nietzsche means by reason concealing the will-to-power.

The belief that science and worldviews (weltanschauungen) are different things with different goals is no longer hegemonic. Science once stood apart from worldviews but this is no longer so. In the twenty-first century, the scientific method has been colonised by worldviews—social constructivism, intersectional identity politics, gender ideology—all of which are reactions against metaphysics from the immanent critique.

Habermas notes the fear accompanying the immanent critique from the beginning, "the imitation substantiality of a metaphysics renewed one more time" (9), suggesting the critique—being incomplete—is threatened by the return of a transcendence it has declared false. This echoes MacIntyre's observation repeated here: "If a premodern view of morals and politics is to be vindicated against modernity, it will be in *something like* Aristotelian terms or not at all." It remains to be seen what kind of transcendence is tolerated in the public sphere after postmodernity evolves into whatever comes next. The wide-ranging attacks on transcendence since the French Revolution—the culture wars of the Long March—remind us that obtaining and maintaining power is always ideological and depends on subverting or neutralising what perceived rivals believe about transcendence.

During their revolutionary journey into immanence and embodiment, the discourses of emancipation have become oppressive and dystopian. If the Long March has succeeded, it has paradoxically created a new version of the feudalism it intended to replace. In *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism* (2020),

Joel Kotkin describes this new feudalism. The apex is dominated by two classes. The first, a new clerisy, dominates the professions, the universities, the media, and those who manipulate the semiotic levers of culture. The second, a new aristocracy, is led by tech oligarchs with immense wealth and control of information. The third, a middle class, is still largely made up of small businesspeople, minor property owners, skilled workers, and private-sector oriented professionals. This middle class, traditionally understood as the engine of social mobility and change, was ascendent for most of the modern period but is now in steep decline. Below the middle class are the new serfs, a rapidly expanding population without property. If Kotkin is correct, a new revolution is brewing, the outcome of which is difficult to predict.

Concealed within the dispute over whether metaphysics is possible after Kant there is substantial disagreement over whether "old truths" can be appropriated by the immanent critique, whether their meanings can be adapted to suit the immanent critique, and the nature of any change of meaning the "old truths" are subjected to during their adaptation (15). In clarifying the terms of this disagreement, Habermas believes it is necessary to distinguish between questions that are metaphysical and questions that are religious, before making a seemingly counterintuitive declaration for a disciple of the Frankfurt School to make:

> I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person[hood] and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation (15).

Is this ironic? The Frankfurt School has been responsible for the immanent critique of metaphysics, broadly understood as the undermining of the Judeo-Christian worldview, but here Habermas suggests that a Judeo-Christian understanding of salvation history (*heilsgeschichte*), standing outside or apart from metaphysics, must be appropriated if concepts like the moral and ethical life, personhood, individuality, freedom, and emancipation can be understood. Unfortunately, for Habermas, there is no such thing as a unified historical understanding of salvation within a unified historical Judeo-Christianity. While inseparable, Judaism and Christianity remain distinct, as do

their similar-but-different understandings of salvation and *heilsgeschichte*. Habermas clouds these murky waters further with the following position on the limits of philosophy:

> Viewed from without, religion, which has largely been deprived of its worldview functions, is still indispensable in ordinary life for normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary. For this reason, even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with religious practice—and not merely in the sense of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous. This ongoing coexistence even throws light on a curious dependence of a philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary. Philosophy, even in postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes (for the time being?) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses (51).

So Habermas arrives at a paradox, an aporia. While post-metaphysical thinking has deprived western religion of its worldview functions, the substance of Judeo-Christianity is still necessary for contact with the extraordinary (that is, with what materialism does not explain).

While this raises complex issues beyond the scope of this book, as far as interpreting texts is concerned, it is necessary to avoid being conscripted into the war between structuralism and poststructuralism or becoming stranded in the no-man's land of post-Saussurean theorising. If this task is daunting, particularly in the twenty-first century, it is helpful to remain focused on how Habermas's understanding of mimesis relates to Aristotle's:

> A literary text … does not come forth with the claim that it documents an occurrence in the world; nonetheless, it does want to draw the reader into an imagined occurrence step by step, until he follows the narrated events as if they were real. Even the fabricated reality must be capable of being experienced by the reader as a reality that is read—otherwise a novel does not accomplish what it is supposed to (211).

Here is a mimetic sense of verisimilitude (lifelikeness) in some respects like Aristotle's, in others radically different, because Habermas belongs to a materialist tradition, a tradition of immanent critique, devoted to declaring false the telos of all metaphysical transcendence.

Within Aristotelian teleology, whether a natural phenomenon or mimetic text corresponds with an external truth ultimately depends on what signs and signals mean—what their telos is for, what their telos does—within the correspondence theory of truth. The Aristotelian logic of the correspondence theory gave way to the coherence theory, then to Marxist materialism and Nietzschean perspectivism before the Frankfurt School launched the immanent critique and the Long March. Each interpreter must be aware of how the truth claims assigned to texts changed after Kant, and how those claims relate to the world outside the text.

This is difficult, because in myriad ways each interpreter follows Alice through the looking glass and is challenged by a Humpty Dumpty in a school or department, sentinels who remind them that interpreting texts is about power and control (that is, who would be Master). These sentinels are gatekeepers of whatever orthodoxy is hegemonic at the time. When culture was defined by the classics, the sentinels guarded their orthodoxy. When the concept of culture changed, the classics were displaced by romantic, modern, and postmodern texts and the sentinels became a new clerisy guarding whatever influence the new orthodoxy conferred on them. But their influence has been diminishing, as they wait for whatever will replace postmodernity and the Humanities try to recover from civil war. Many of them do not believe they will fall from the wall and shatter, as Humpty Dumpty did, but this is hubris. Adam's sin shatters everyone at some stage, even the new clerisy.

Should those who feel challenged by Humpty Dumpty fear Derrida's dictum "there is no outside text"? As Sheard insists, meaning proceeds from internal communication within the text not from external communication about its meaning, whether from God or from a power structure bolstering its institutional authority by describing/inscribing its ideology. The solution is always to become more proficient in the interpretation of texts, which engages in open-ended dialogue between author, text, and reader.

The dialogue involves a question: Is there a relationship between interpreting texts and interpreting life? Until recently, the parental caution to children against telling stories (texts) was about not telling lies. The caution was based on a cultural

distinction between fact and fiction, a belief that stories are fictive—somehow untrue—so greater truth is found outside them. This cultural distinction has lost its hegemony, at least in the Anglosphere.

Mimesis tells both lies and truth. This is why Plato banned the poets from his ideal republic. Interpreters need a critical sense of how to distinguish between lies and truth in a world where motives are paradoxical, lies can be disguised as truth, and truth can be disguised as lies. Learning to interpret texts—critical thinking—is necessary to avoid being manipulated by ideologues from either side of the divide, right or left.

This book touches on a large subject: the transition literary texts have made within the shadows of post-Kantian philosophy and aesthetics, which parallels the transition from the correspondence theory to the coherence theory to the Nietzschean perspectivism currently hegemonic. Within the correspondence theory, the truth of a textual representation of an external world—a mimesis of an objective reality—depends on whether it accurately describes (corresponds with) that external world or objective reality. Within the coherence theory, the truth of a textual representation is self-referential, it only needs to cohere within the mimesis itself, it does not need to correspond with an external world or objective reality. Within Nietzschean perspectivism, God is Dead, so there is no external world or objective reality with which to correspond or cohere; that is, the truth of a textual representation or mimesis is whatever readers want it to be.

My tutor's persistent comments—of a modern sense of the tension between classical and romantic imaginaries—were made before close reading gave way to critical theory and the more radical forms of reader response. Studying literary texts in a discipline known as "Romantics to the Present" is one way of understanding the conflict of interpretations at the heart of the culture wars still being fought across the Anglosphere, wars over the conflicts inherent to the immanent critique.

Chapter 1, Interpretation, explores the tension between close reading and reader response in the circle of dialogue between author, text, and reader. Insights are offered from Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) as well as Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969). The concept of reason (logos) is discussed, since it is often said to be the basis of western

civilisation, although it is rarely defined and tends to be invoked—like the god of the gaps—in arbitrary ways. The psychology of consciousness is included here because the journey into and beyond metapsychology represents a stage in the evolution of the West's model of mind, hence the way westerners understand texts and textuality. Chapter 1 ends with a Gadamerian reading of EM Forster's *A Passage to India*.

Chapter 2, Classical, uses the novels of Jane Austen to initiate a discussion of classical form and content. The chapter describes Austen's use of a dramatic structure—normal for Shakespearean drama but unique to the novel of her period—which owes much to Aristotle's *Poetics*, his thinking about tragedy and comedy, influential in how classicism developed in the eighteenth-century. The chapter describes Austen's liminal place between classicism and romanticism, and what she does with the hero concept. In an Austen novel, both hero and heroine must mature, on their journey into the place she reserves for them in her economy of salvation.

Chapter 3, Romantic, introduces the two broad and influential streams within romanticism. The aesthetic stream is illuminated by Andrew Klavan in *The Truth and Beauty* (2022). The philosophical stream is illuminated by Isaiah Berlin in *The Roots of Romanticism* (1999). Like Nietzsche, the romantic movement is a screen on which almost anything can be (and has been) projected. It was wide-ranging, influencing philosophy and aesthetics. It was revolutionary, inspiring Rousseau's utopian thinking about education, the noble savage, and the social contract, as well as Blake's vision of what might be possible if the doors of perception are cleansed. Berlin links it to what he calls the Counter-Enlightenment, the interrogation of metaphysics after Kant, which ultimately led to the immanent critique, hence to the Long March.

Chapter 4, Modern, uses the novels of Australia's Nobel Laureate Patrick White to initiate a discussion of modernist form and content. The chapter provides an overview of the different stages of his distinguished career and how he was received by the reading public, the literary commentariat, and the academic establishment. White once said his novels were attempts "to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial". He believed realism was remote from art: "A novel should heighten life,

should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn't set out what you know already." He wanted to "imagine the real" and explore "the deep end of the unconscious". In pursuing this aesthetic vision, he became an idiosyncratic literary example of the immanent critique.

Chapter 5, Postmodern, uses the work of Margaret Atwood to initiate a discussion about postmodern form and content. Atwood is unique in this study, as she was a university lecturer as well as a creator of literary fiction. Her work is here considered postmodern in a qualified sense, under Mark Taylor's rubric that one man's modernism is another man's postmodernism. She did not begin her distinguished career as a feminist author—the sexual revolution and second wave feminism were just emerging as she started to write—still, she has been closely identified with feminist concerns. She has extended and, in a sense, has concluded the tradition Austen launched: the drama of female identity, the dilemma of woman's freedom and constraint in literary art.

Chapter 6, Two Catholic Novelists, uses the novels of Graham Greene and Muriel Spark to initiate a conversation about form and content in the Catholic novel. Greene's Catholic novels are both widely admired and widely reviled, as Kermode has observed: "it is very noticeable that the best criticism of Mr Greene is hostile." The problem Greene faced, of which he was highly aware, was presenting theological discourse as journalistic realism. Spark was not constrained by realism of any kind, journalistic or literary, and earned herself the title "Jane Austen of the Surrealists". She believed the victim–oppressor complex of socially-conscious art had outlived its usefulness and should be replaced by the arts of "satire and ridicule" as "the only honourable weapon we have left" against what is wrong, whether evil, tyranny, or injustice.

Chapter 7, Two Protestant Novelists, uses the novels of Marilynne Robinson and Douglas Wilson to initiate a conversation about form and content in the Protestant novel. Robinson taught creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop 1991–2016. One of her teachers, the postmodernist author John Hawkes, believed the novel's true enemies were plot, character, setting, and theme. Writing fiction in this unfamiliar landscape is more challenging than writing fiction to an identifiable narrative genre or formula. Douglas Wilson