FICTION & THE WEAVE OF LIFE: SCEPTICISM AND HUMANISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a sustained discussion of the relationship between literary texts and extra-textual reality. My overarching goal is to present an alternative to what I think is a misguided and unacceptable thread in many of the dominant contemporary theories of literature: the conception of literary language as a self-referential use of language, one which does not and cannot reach beyond the ‘world of the text’ to touch the nature and reality of the world of the reader of literary texts. It is misguided because it assumes that there is an unbridgeable gap between literary language and reality; and it is unacceptable because it renders what we regard as one of our primary mouthpieces of human culture speechless about anything external to the borders of a fictional world.

In contrast to this position, I develop a theory of what I call linguistic humanism. The defining feature of this position is that it denies that there is an insurmountable gap between a literary text and the world external to it. Linguistic humanism, as I develop it in my thesis, offers an account of how we can see reality as present immediately and directly in the literary use of language, as a part of a literary text’s internal structure. I will argue that the idea that we can segregate a literary text from reality is theoretically confused, since literature’s use of a common social language, properly understood,
reveals a way of understanding how it can weave our world into the very words it uses to construct its fictional worlds.

I structure the main argument of my dissertation around this picture of literary language, drawing in particular on a tradition in the philosophy of language that runs from the later Wittgenstein to contemporary philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Hilary Putnam. I argue that since language provides our point of contact with reality, it is by examining the structure of language, of linguistic convention and practice, that we illuminate and investigate the ways in which we confront social reality. Literature, I argue, is uniquely capable of providing this sort of investigation.
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INTRODUCTION

THIS THESIS IS a detailed discussion of the relationship between literature and life — or as it might be more fashionably described, it is a study of the connection between literary texts and extra-textual reality. The first chapter acts as an introduction to the conceptual project of this thesis, and here I just want to offer the reader a few general words about what to expect in the pages to come.

In the following chapters I explore a tension that exists between two intuitions, a tension that I believe lies at the core of the concept of the literary work of art. One intuition concerns the social and cognitive value of literature, and it tells us that literature offers us a window to our world. We might call this the humanist intuition and characterize it as the thought that literature presents the reader with an intimate and intellectually significant engagement with social and cultural reality. It is the idea, one familiar to all of us in some respect, that literature is the textual form to which we turn when we want to read the story of our shared form of life, our moral and emotional, social and sexual — and so on for whatever corners of our culture we think literature brings to view — ways of being human. The other intuition concerns how we understand the fiction that goes into a work of literary fiction. For it strikes us as equally intuitive to say that the imaginative basis of literary creation presents to the reader not her world but other worlds, what we commonly call fictional worlds. If we think that literature tells us
about our world, we have to make this square with the obvious fact that we understand, and certainly read, literature as exempt from the task of worldly exegesis. Literary fiction trades in aesthetic creation rather than factual representation. It speaks about people made of paper, who inhabit worlds made only of words. And from this it seems quite natural to conclude that literature is therefore essentially and intentionally silent about the way our world is, choosing instead to speak about worlds none of which can quite be our own. The tension, then, is a matter of how we might reconcile these two intuitions, these basic visions we have of literature as somehow at once, if you will, both thoroughly our-worldly and otherworldly. This thesis is an attempt to offer such a reconciliation.

To have an interest in offering such a reconciliation is to risk casting oneself as an outsider, as one who is conspicuously out of step with current trends in the philosophy and theory of literature. Though in the last ten years there has been a slight renewal of interest in the humanist intuition,¹ it is fair to say that common opinion has it that to discuss humanism is to conjure an old and annoying demon, one often thought to have been exorcised from literary theory long ago. The reason for this, of course, is not that anyone believes that we have come to realize that literary fiction is after all irrelevant to life. It is because in many minds humanism is associated with a crude and antiquated tendency in the history of aesthetics. In attempting this reconciliation, humanists have often been guilty of two sins, namely that of forging the connection to our world by taking literature to be a mimetic rendering of reality — thus relying on the

now much disfavored representational view of literary fiction — and then going on to
treat as the ultimate object of literary appreciation not the literary work of art itself but
this world of which the text is thought to be just a mirror. There is an expression Derrida
has popularized, “il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” If tamed slightly into stating that, at least
from the literary perspective, nothing outside the text matters, Derrida’s curious
proclamation brings to light a widely accepted claim. The extra-textual is thought to be
the extra-literary, beyond the reach of anyone who wants to illuminate the nature of what
we experience when we look between the covers of a novel. To try to step from literature
to the extra-textual is to take a step away from the very object of literary theory. And the
humanist is typically taken to be the theorist who has failed to learn this basic lesson, the
dolt, in a word, who keeps trying to turn the hors-texte into the object of literary
investigation.

What I hope to show in this thesis is that we can be humanists without the sin. I
want to show that in offering this reconciliation we can construct a genuine humanistic
theory of literature — that the humanist intuition, once properly developed, can bring us
closer to rather than away from the literary. The humanist need not be the reactionary
outsider he is commonly thought to be and indeed often has been. As I will argue, his
intuition can sit quite comfortably with those theories of literature we traditionally take
to reveal its implausibility. And so a properly developed theory of humanism, far from
demanding that we abandon standard ways of speaking about the nature of literary

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2 Derrida (1976), 158.
fiction, can be seen as offering a significant and attractive addition to the various critical and theoretical vocabularies we already possess.

In the first chapter I set up the challenge of offering such a reconciliation. I introduce here the sceptic, himself a fiction but a fiction whose voice will draw together the most powerful reasons available for doubting that this reconciliation is possible. The structure of the sceptic’s argument is quite simple, though its consequences are severe. He begins by telling us that the humanist must accept the following constraint: the humanist must prove that the value he wants to attribute to a literary text is an actual property of the text itself. If he does not meet this constraint, the sceptic will show us that the humanist will fail to identify a proper literary value, and thus he will default on his promise to tell us something about the nature of literature. But if the humanist accepts this constraint, and the sceptic will show us that he must, his intuition begins to look incoherent. We might recall Shakespeare here, who in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* declares a basic truth about literary creation, the same truth the sceptic will turn against the humanist.

> And as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shape and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

The sceptic will charge that it is utterly mysterious what it would mean to claim that we can see something real in this “airy nothing” literature presents to view. If the humanist must locate reality *within* the literary text, and if the literary text brings only fictions to view, the sceptic will claim that humanism is hopelessly senseless.
In the following chapters I offer a response to the sceptic’s challenge. I will show that we can accept the sceptic’s constraint and still be respectable humanists. To be sure, the sceptic will in effect construct for us the theory of fiction we will use in the following chapters. His arguments will set the boundaries of our discussion of humanism, showing us where the humanist cannot go if he wants to stay in touch with the literary. The precise threat the sceptic poses lies in the moral he draws from his reflections on the nature of literary fiction, what I will call the charge of literary isolationism: his belief that his arguments reveal a gap between literature and reality the humanist necessarily cannot bridge. The humanist’s project will then be one of showing that we can accept the sceptic’s theory of fiction while avoiding the charge of isolationism.

In the second chapter I will begin my defense of humanism. One of the reasons we are so often inclined to think humanism senseless is because it shocks many of our more general linguistic intuitions — intuitions the sceptic will exploit in constructing his picture of literary isolationism. To the extent that literature represents anything, it represents fictions. Yet one of the most common beliefs we have is that language fundamentally connects to reality by way of linguistic representation. In other words, it appears that literature’s failure to represent reality places a wedge between its words and our world. The claim I pursue in this chapter is that we can accept this, that the humanist can embrace this (as it is often called) ‘representational divide’ that runs between literature and reality. The humanist’s strategy is to argue that in the construction of their imaginary worlds, works of literary fiction can bring to view something crucial about the structure of our world. To say that literature is fictional is to accept that the worlds it
describes are fully independent of the actual world. To become humanists is to realize that these thoroughly fictional worlds bring to view what they take from us in their creation, what turns out to be our standards of representation, standards that reveal how our words most basically align us with our world. And this, we will see, will provide the humanist with a way of claiming that we can identify something quite real directly in literature’s presentation of fictional content.

In constructing this foundation for the humanist, I will rely heavily on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and the tradition of which he is often seen as the source, one which runs through the writings of philosophers such as Stanley Cavell, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty. Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language has been no stranger to literary theory. But the interest he has held for it has largely concerned his notion of language games. I am not entirely sure how fruitful this manner of appropriating Wittgenstein has been (one always wonders what is explained by saying that literary texts play language games. Does this tell us something that we did not already know? Or is it just one more way of stating the obvious fact that fictional narratives have a unique logic and structure?); and I should say here that I will not be trying to sell this idea in which, for better or worse, I have consistently found myself unable to take an interest. I will be recommending a rather different appropriation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, one which makes use of his notion of linguistic criteria, and in particular the role they play in securing the sort of connection between world and word that I will argue literature is capable of bringing to view. With the exception of two
very fine articles, one by Bernard Harrison and the other by David Schalkwyk, this aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language remains an untapped resource for the theory and philosophy of literature. And in this chapter I will attempt to map out a precise strategy for importing it.

What the second chapter will offer us is a model for making sense of the claim that literature can present our world to view. But the humanist needs something more than this. Any form of humanism worth its name must capture the intuition that literature offers cognitive rewards to the careful reader. Otherwise it is very difficult to see why we should be interested in becoming humanists, why we should look to literature for a vision of our world if it is incapable of illuminating our understanding of this world. The question of the cognitive value of literature is one of the thorniest and most debated in the philosophy of literature. It is the central challenge in the development of a viable theory of humanism, and it is also the most difficult to answer. We will see that the sceptic has powerful arguments that suggest that, even if it is true that literature can bring our world to view, literature is at best capable of offering only idle visions of a world we already well know. We will also see that in a crucial respect the sceptic is right: literature offers no knowledge of our world. In fact, we will see that the most we can say is that literature presupposes rather than imparts knowledge of the world.

But if literature is not a route to further knowledge, the humanist will argue that this is no loss. Indeed, he will show us that the traditional humanistic search for so-called 'knowledge through literature' seriously miscasts the true role literature can play in

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3 See Harrison (1993); and Schalkwyk (1995).
intellectual life. Literature offers what is better described as an acknowledgement of this knowledge we bring to the text. As I will argue, the concept of acknowledgement describes a form of cognitive awareness left unmentioned by the notions of propositional and conceptual knowledge — the sorts of knowledge with which philosophers of literature are traditionally concerned. To say that literature offers acknowledgement is to say that it can trace and give testament to the link between the conceptual and the social. Literature may not offer knowledge of the world, but it is able to shows us the precise role a piece of knowledge plays on our culture. If this is so, far from being cognitively trivial, we will see that literature can offer what turns out to be a fulfillment of knowledge, a completion of our understanding of how our concepts unite us with our world.

With the argument of the third chapter I will have made my case for humanism. I use the fourth and final chapter to offer some general observations on the notion of fiction. I discuss two positions which I take to represent extreme ends of the spectrum of currently fashionable theories of fiction, namely postmodern 'panfictionalism' and the analytic modeling of fiction on make-belief. Both of these theories, though in very different ways, represent a tendency that I think is in large part responsible for the quite visible disinterest in the question of humanism in the last thirty or so years of literary theory and criticism. The problem concerns how we should understand the nature of what is often called 'the fictive stance,' the basic attitude we assume when we appreciate some described state of affairs or textual content as fictional. And the tendency is one of treating the fictive stance as by nature a turning away from an appreciation of reality. Each of these theories, though again in quite different ways, give expression to the idea,
a very mistaken one, that one and the same stance cannot have both the fictional and the real as its object. I will conclude this chapter by showing that if we look outside of literature and examine other cultural practices that make use of fictions, we can see that far from standing in a relationship of mutual antagonism, we have a general understanding that the fictive stance is open to a direct appreciation of reality. From here it will be a small step back to the humanist and a concluding discussion of what it might mean to describe the theory offered in the previous chapters in terms of a concrete stance we take towards texts.
CHAPTER ONE

Isolationists & Humanists

To appreciate a work of art, we need bring with us nothing from life

— Clive Bell

WHAT WE MIGHT term the 'humanist intuition' — the conviction, however imprecise and pre-theoretical, that literature can illuminate reality — has been with us in one guise or another since Aristotle wrote his Poetics, nearly as old as the western literary tradition itself. Though only rudimentarily developed, we find there the basic idea that literature represents generalized features of life, that it deals with, to put it simply, how we humans are.1 The intuition would likely strike many of us uninitiated in contemporary literary-critical theory and philosophy of literature as obvious, perhaps even bordering on a platitude. I would venture that to most sensitive but non-professional readers nothing would seem particularly controversial in the claim that great literature is a mouthpiece of our social and cultural reality: what we look to when we want to find a direct expression

1 Of course Aristotle had no notion of a position called "humanism". But his Poetics is often taken to be the first expression of the basis of a humanistic theory. I would say without much fear of error that the birth of what we now refer to as literary humanism is the famous passage in the Poetics (running from 1451a38 - 1451b12) in which Aristotle claims that since poiesis deals with the universal (katholou) rather than the particular, it is more like philosophy than history. He ends the argument by explaining that this universal concerns "the sorts of things people may say or do necessarily or for the most part," how we humans are in this sense.
of its ‘living spirit’, as Schiller might say. And most of us, I will venture further, would be genuinely taken aback to find that the dominant theories of literature either leave no room for humanism or — worse still for the intuitions of the uninitiated — spend a good amount of time trying to show it to be an incoherent and indeed anti-literary position.

As anyone with even a modest knowledge of contemporary literary theory has likely learned, calling oneself a humanist resonates much the way calling oneself a Cartesian dualist does in philosophical circles: certainly there are a few around, but the very label has the scent of the come-and-gone, of running conservatively counter to contemporary trends and positions. More frightening still for the uninitiated, if we look through the history of literary theory we see that there are actually some very good reasons for this. The traditional homes of humanism have either been fairly simpleminded and now outdated forms of biographical criticism and various other life-&-times-of-the-author interpretive strategies — the old idea of l’homme et son œuvre — or a sort of literary metaphysicalism which sought Essences, Truths and Universals in such a way that they often appear more akin to mysticism than genuine theory.\(^2\) However commonplace the lay belief in humanism may be, it is nevertheless hard not to be left with the impression that the intuition has not been done justice in the maze of contemporary literary-critical theory.

\(^2\) We can see this best in many of the formulations of the ‘concrete universal’ given by the followers of New Criticism, and might be best seen in Cleanth Brooks’ idea of ‘the eternal’ in the classic *The Well Wrought Urn* (2nd ed. 1968). The same can be said of the so-called Scrutinists’s (followers of F.R. Leavis) notoriously vague notion of ‘life’ as an indefinable and basic presence in texts. Together the New Critics and Scrutinists represent the major humanistic movements of this century (See Eagleton, 1983), and both were effectively dead by the 1960s when poststructuralism swept through literary theory.
To be sure, traditional philosophy has not been much kinder to humanism than literary theory. If humanism is as old as Aristotle, anti-humanism reaches back even farther. The idea that literature connects us to reality has been attacked since Plato’s famous anti-literary fulmination in the Republic. The fear that underlie much of his anti-humanism stems from his insight, a reasonable one itself, that there is something genuinely odd in the very idea of literature: literature speaks our language as it were — it borrows our words and grammar, our idioms and cultural references — but it does very strange things with these words. In literary texts the rails of reference run not from word to world but from word to chimeras, creatures of an author’s imagination. And the natural conclusion is that literature therefore talks quite literally about nothing, that it is a mere flatus vocis. For Plato the humanist intuition would suggest a rather serious case of ontological confusion, a sort of feeblemindedness in which one is tricked by literature into taking the unreal for the real, and so morally and intellectually dangerous for this reason. And Plato’s basic reason for rejecting the humanist intuition is neither antiquated nor unusual. Some of the major philosophical movements of this century have echoed Plato’s argument. To take an extreme example, the philosophy of the Vienna Circle, and much of the subsequent verificational and positivistic philosophy it gave rise to, had it that any use of language which is not reducible to the physical (empirical) mode of speech — in essence any use which is not reducible to a description of some feature of the actual world

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3 A line of thought that underlies his arguments beginning at Republic X 595 with: “Poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, unless they possess the true nature of the originals as an anecdote.” The same idea is present in his argument in Ion, though there it is presented as a question about what one can learn from the poetic arts rather than as an invective against poetry itself.
— is meaningless. Literature (along with the arts in general) was thus relegated to the status of beautiful fluff and pomp: it may speak volumes to our purely aesthetic sensibilities but it says nothing of any genuine cognitive value.

Humanism, we are beginning to see, is as controversial as it is intuitive. This chapter is an examination of what produces the controversy. Here I will give shape to the anti-humanist voice against which I will develop my theory of humanism in the following chapters, offering our sceptic a stage before we try to answer his charges. What we will see is that far from being a sort of humorless cynic, the humanist's sceptic appears to have both literature and reason on his side — the arguments he sets forth here pose a genuine threat to our humanist intuition — and the remaining chapters will be an attempt to wrestle ourselves away from his grip.

Before I begin I need to give substance to the idea of humanism as it strikes me and as I will develop it in the following chapters. The picture of humanism I want to develop has no more and no less in common with traditional forms of humanism than is given in the following general description. As I will defend it, humanism asserts that literature can be, and when it is good almost always is, informative not merely of the world of the text but also of the world of the readers enjoying the text. Though it is obviously true that literary fiction trades in the unreal, in the imaginative creation of people and places that manifestly are not, humanism still wants to claim that a literary text

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4 My construction of the sceptic here is built out of problems that arise in almost all of the core areas of the philosophy of literature. Each of the problems the sceptic draws on — questions concerning the nature of
is in some significant sense not simply what might be called *fictional-worldly* but also *our-worldly*. As I will advance it, humanism asserts that through works of literature the significance of very real human experiences, practices, and institutions can be revealed or illuminated; that a grasp of reality can be gained from close reading. The humanist will argue, for example, that there is something common to both the world of (the fictional character) Othello and that of the audience reading *Othello*, and that it is not that the readers and the text merely share the same language, parting worlds as it were when questions arise of what we and literary texts use language to talk about. Rather, the humanist will argue that at some significant level they both talk about the *same* world. And a well developed humanist theory will urge that this connection, whatever it may consist in, allows us to say what is either denied or virtually impossible to make sense of within the framework of much contemporary philosophy of literature and literary criticism: that far from engaging nothing but formalistic interests or attitudes of make-belief, literary experience may be a direct appreciation of the real world.

### 1.1 Indirect Humanism

The idea of 'directness' in the above description of my humanist approach is paramount, and in this section I want to show exactly why it is essential that a viable picture of
humanism embrace it. If a picture of humanism is direct it will promise to secure the intuition that literary texts connect us to reality by locating the our-worldly, in some yet unspecified sense, immediately within the text: that we see, if you like, reality in the very words that make up a work of literature. In contrast to this view I describe in this section what I will refer to as 'indirect humanism,' a position, to put it crudely at first mention, that attempts to bring literature to bear on the our-worldly by exploring our ability to apply aspects of the contents of a literary work to extra-textual reality. As we will see, the indirect humanist expresses what is one of the most common ways of capturing an undeniably significant social and moral value of the institution of literature. But it is very difficult to tell what precise theoretical work we can do with his insight. As we often find it, it is unclear whether an author promoting a position of this sort offers it as an observation of one of the social values of literature or as an identification of a proper humanistic literary value. As we shall see, this is the crucial point. If expressed as only the former, it is unexceptionable. The difficulty lies with treating it as an account of literary value, of the significance we find within a text. And what we will see is that the difficulty the indirect humanist faces shows us exactly what is at stake in developing the humanist intuition.

If we want to find a way of capturing the conviction that we are connected to reality through literature, it seems quite natural to begin by trying to develop the idea that literature can illustrate possibilities of reality, that it can offer a sketch of how, for example, suffering might undo reason (say in Euripides's Medea) or a way in which we might see modern technology and perversion as growing out of one another (say in J.G. Ballard's Crash). We latch on to what might be called the 'modal dimension' of literary
involvement, to its ability to present a way of conceiving experience, and look here to ground the connection between the world of a literary fiction and our world. As Kendall Walton expresses it, "perhaps fiction is more often a means of performing other illocutionary acts — suggesting, asking, raising an issue, reminding, encouraging to act — than a means of making assertions [about the world]."\(^5\) It is not that literature, trading in fictions as it does, tells us how the world is. But it can suggest ways of regarding it, presenting us with possibilities of worldly understanding and involvement.

It is very easy to give substance to this line of thought. We begin by noticing that literature, while talking about fictions, nevertheless is also able to offer conceptions, stances and perspectives. When we read, we are drawn into its perspective, thinking from within it (the confessor's view of the pleasure of suffering in Notes From Underground, for example). Once we have done this, we need only state the uncontestable fact that we can then take the conception we find in a story and use our reflective and imaginative capacities to transform it into a tool for approaching reality. Gregory Currie offers an example of this:

A really vivid fiction might get you to revise your values. Sometimes we suspect that our values are the wrong ones, and we may then desire to value differently. But fictions serve not only to change our current values; they can, more modestly, help us to reinforce or test our commitment to those own values....Fictions can help here by inviting us to imagine ourselves more committed than we really are to our values and then to see ourselves, in imagination, flourishing as a result.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Walton (1990), 78.
\(^6\) Currie (1995), 254-255.
And Lamarque and Olsen put it well when they say:

Through reflecting on certain conceptions in works of fiction, we learn to reflect with those conceptions in other contexts. Similarly by adopting certain points of view towards imaginary states of affairs, under the direction of the storyteller, we might come to adopt those same points of view in comparable situations elsewhere.\(^7\)

Literature offers a stance, and once we enter it and take possession of it, we acquire a facility with that perspective, an ability to think from within it, to see with it. And it is only a small step from here to find that we can enlist it in the aid of world-directed thought and understanding, turning the conception we find in a novel into a full-blooded concept for negotiating reality.

It is difficult to express how frequently one runs into claims like the above. Indeed, in light of some of the more rigidly formalist theories of literature, it seems worth shouting the indirect humanist’s argument. But thinking that we can turn this way of expressing the humanist’s intuition into a viable theory of literature is another matter altogether. Turning the above insights into a genuine humanistic theory of literature requires explaining: (1) that this act of imaginative and reflective involvement provides us new ways of approaching reality and (2) that this says something about literary experience, about a value we find in a literary work. Few will deny (1). Indeed it would seem silly to deny this: it would amount to claiming that we cannot apply the conception found in a work of art to the real world, and I have no idea how — or why — one would

\(^7\) Lamarque and Olsen (1996), 136.
argue this. As we will see, (2) is the essential condition, and the problematic one, for it is easy to show that it is untenable. Indeed, the sceptic will show us that the indirect humanist’s thesis reduces to a near platitude, that from the literary point of view it is just a grand way of recording the dull fact that novels, at least interesting ones, make us think.

The important question is what we think about when we think about a literary text, what we contemplate when we appreciate the story of the novel. And the sceptic has a well-stocked arsenal of arguments — going back to Plato’s Ion and added to significantly this century — that purport to show that the answer to this question is that it is the world only at the expense of the text. The sceptic argues, in short, that we lose the literary if we try to unite it with the worldly as the indirect humanist does.

The sceptic’s argument is as simple as it is convincing. If literary texts offer suggestions, if they whisper possibilities and otherwise hint at new ways of approaching reality, it will always be the world that answers, it will always be reality that determines whether or not these possibilities can be turned into cognitively adequate, world-directed attitudes.8 Literary texts obviously do present the reader with objects of contemplation, namely the world of the story. But beyond what is asserted, proposed and stated in the literary text about the world of that text, a text does not provide a further claim to the effect that “this is how the world is as well.” We may of course take what we find in a literary text and ask whether it holds true in the real world, whether, if we apply it there,

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8 As Diffey puts it: “we cannot claim to have learned anything [from literature] unless we know that an additional premise is true, namely that the world is as the work shows it to be.” For, “[t]he mediums of art enable works of art to show or present states of affairs to contemplation, states of affairs which may suggest but which do not assert further states beyond the world of the work”. (Diffey, 1995, 210.)
we can acquire a better perspective of worldly affairs. But as soon as we have done this we have left aside literary appreciation and stepped into something more like social science: we are now asking questions about the world and not the text. These questions may be infinitely important, but, the sceptic forces us to admit, they say nothing about the value we find within a literary text. Literary texts paradigmatically present fictional narratives, stories about characters and events that are not, and these are the objects before us when appreciating the work as a work of literary fiction. We may reflect or hypothesize and ask whether the world is like that of the text, or what it would be like if it were. But these are questions the world answers, not the text. Thus, the sceptic argues, worldly questions, moral and cognitive insights as the indirect humanist conceives them, have no relevance to a theory of literature and literary value. They are two independent activities, the literary theorist's and the humanist's: the literary theorist wants to understand the text better, the humanist wants to turn from the text to see what the world has to say about the visions presented in it.

Though the argument I just sketched is offered against a specific way of explaining the connection between literature and reality, it should be easy to see how the sceptic can develop it in ways that will infect any picture of humanism that casts the relation between text and world as an indirect relation. The indirect humanist accepts that there is a divide between world and literary fiction and tries to bring them nearer through the activities of imagination, reflection, simulation, and so forth. And this makes the sceptic's job very easy, for as long as there is a divide, he can always point to it and show that the humanist
is standing on the wrong side, the side of the world and not the literary text. It does not matter how close the humanist draws together the two sides of the divide, for as long as there is a divide the sceptic can show that whatever bridge the humanist attempts to construct will always lead from what is in the literary text to what is outside it — and hence to what lies outside the purview of literary-textual understanding. The sceptic can show, in short, that the humanist is always a step too far from the text.

We now have an idea of why humanists, as paradoxical as it might sound on first hearing, have often been thought to be anti-literary, prone to lose literature in the very attempt to capture its value. It is fine to speak of what use we can put a literary text to, of its instrumental value in pursuing other goals (such as grasping human relations with the complexity and understanding Dostoevsky does in his novels). But if we try to develop this into a full-blooded humanistic position, if we say that humanism is explained in terms of a relation between literary text and world bridged by our imaginative and reflective capacities, the sceptic has no trouble cutting the humanist's life-line and letting world float away in the name of literature. The sceptic does not attack our humanist intuition

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9 It is for these reasons that I find Martha Nussbaum as unhelpful for the development of the humanist intuition as I find her interesting, and this explains why I say so little about this very important philosopher. Consider this quote: "Imagination is the chief instrument of the good. It is more or less a commonplace to say that a person's ideas and treatment of his fellows are dependent upon his power to put himself imaginatively in their place...Wherever social divisions and barriers exist, practices and ideas that correspond to them fix metes and bounds, so that liberal action is placed under restraint...Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration." (1995.), 348. Her theory is more complex than is expressed in this passage, but the reliance on possibility and imagination we find in her works seems to me always to invite the arguments against indirect humanism I am giving. (She, it should be mentioned, presents her insights as qualifying the particular texts she is interested in — those of Henry James in particular — and not as a general theory of humanism, so it would be unfair to claim that she has not given an adequate general account of the humanistic value of literature, for she is not attempting this).
because he is an anti-literary brute. On the contrary he represents a concern that is tremendously important and undeniably literary: (as it is often said) to take the textuality of literary texts seriously.\textsuperscript{10} He fights against what he sees as a strain in speaking about the value of literature, one of relegating its status to that of serving non-literary interests; he refuses to let us explain our connection to literature in terms of its ability to promote non-literary interests, in terms of those personal and social activities that may be improved if we adopt the perspective given in works of literature. It may be part and parcel of taking Notes From Underground seriously as literary text that I think from within the confessor’s perspective, grasping the complexity of the moral world in which he finds himself; it is another thing altogether to express the value of this text in terms of how I can become a smarter, nicer person by reflecting on real-life situations with this same perspective.\textsuperscript{11}

If we recall the old joke about the tennis player who tells his lover that what he likes best about their romantic life is that it improves his on-court stamina, we might say that the sceptic, like the slighted lover, thinks that the significance of the activity at hand

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\textsuperscript{10} "Textuality" can mean any number of things, depending on the author. It has, as I use it, the basic determination of ‘narrative autonomy’, of giving notice to the fact that a literary text’s narrative content is not made to answer to how things stand outside of the text. This line of thought is developed in the following pages of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{11} For this reason we can see how unsatisfying views like Gordon Graham’s and Putnam’s are for developing the humanistic intuition. As Graham puts it: “To see how art can be a form of understanding, it is essential to grasp that it involves moving from art to experience, not from experience to art. It is true that the images by which we are confronted in art are always images of particulars, but as Aristotle points out in the case of drama, images and characters can be generalized…Art may be imaginary through and through, but it can still enable us to look more closely sensitively at the people, circumstances and relationships in our own experience”. (Graham, 1995, 35.) And Putnam: “What I am saying is that if we want to reason rationally about feminism, communism, liberalism, or just about life…what Doris Lessing does [in The Golden Notebook] is enormously important.” (Putnam, 1975, 91.) Both Graham and Putnam may be very right, if we take these claims as paying notice to the social value of literature. But this line of reasoning says nothing about what a humanistic literary value might be.
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has been ignored. We need to respect the textuality of literary texts, and a condition of this is making the value we attribute to a text a quality of the text itself. What the sceptic wants, and what he rightly requires of us, is that we respect the autonomy of literature. This needn't mean that if we are to appreciate a work as a literary work, we then must appreciate only the merely linguistic, purely technical or solely structural features of text. Indeed the idea of textual autonomy requires only that an account of what we value in literature be expressed as a feature of the text itself, leaving us free to characterize this value as we wish as long we can meet this basic condition (standards of reasonableness notwithstanding). The requirement of textual autonomy prevents us from looking outside of the text when searching for its value, and the sceptic is very reasonable to demand this of us.

1.2 The Sceptic’s Recital

We are beginning to see how important it was to include the idea of directness in the initial description of the humanism. We will now see how controversial it is. The upshot of the argument of 1.1 is that the humanist fails to capture the value of literature — indeed loses literature itself — if he tries to develop the humanist intuition by casting it as

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12 Though the autonomy thesis has certainly been argued for in this light. For a contemporary example of an extreme version of what is often called the thesis of ‘formal textual autonomy’, see William Gass (1996). Cynthia Freeland offers an excellent discussion and critique of contemporary versions of this thesis in her essay “Art and Moral Knowledge” (1997).
an indirect relation between literature and world, describing it as an act of carrying over
what we see in the literary text to what lies outside of it. And this forces us to see how
important it is to find a way of describing world as in some sense an internal textual
quality, a presence found within the text. But the sceptic has a number of arguments that
suggest that taking the step from an indirect humanism to a direct humanism is
impossible. Indeed the sceptic introduced in the last section now becomes our sceptic, for
the arguments he advances here show up a view of literature that strikes at the heart of the
humanist intuition as I advanced it. He shows us that the standard picture of how language
is able to latch onto reality cannot be applied to literature, and he thus leaves us without a
point of entry for bringing world into literature.

There is not an argument against the idea that we can have a direct vision of our
world in a work of literature. There are rather a number of observations, all sharing in
common a very entrenched idea of how world-directed uses of language function, that
make the idea of direct humanism look like either hyperbole or near idiocy: at best an
overemphasizing of the fact that literary texts borrow bits and pieces of our world in
constructing their narrative lines; at worst a confusion of the distinction between the world
of a work of literary fiction and the real world. As Lubomir Dolezel puts it, implicit in the
distinction between literary fiction and non-fictional writing is a contrast between ‘world-
constructing’ and ‘world-imaging’ texts and discourse forms, in effect a distinction
between texts which attempt to describe the world and those which attempt to create
one.\textsuperscript{13} Literary texts are not empirically adequate statements of fact. They famously make no claim to being transcriptions of the actual. Indeed it is built into our idea of ‘reading something as literary fiction’ that we do not take the text to be constrained, like a journalist’s report, by the facts; it is built into our understanding of its sentences that they are “beyond truth-valuation.”\textsuperscript{14} And this implies an independence of literary content from factual content; indeed it suggests that the presence of the former reveals a turning away from the latter. World-imaging texts are built out of an attempt to offer factual content. For this reason we can speak of their descriptions and statements as running by way of world, praising them on these grounds when they succeed and criticizing them on these grounds when they fail (such as when we criticize an inaccurate history text). There is, we can already see, no obvious role for these conditions and constraints to play in our theoretical understanding of a textual form such as literary fiction. It is at root world-constructing, and thus we have no clear idea of what it might even mean to say that its words attempt to offer up a view of the our-worldly.

For the sceptic this brings into view a very profound point: literary language does not use the basic semantic-linguistic tools that account for the possibility of using words to connect us to world. Literature is not brought before the basic semantic court of worldly truth and reference. It is not an account of actual states of affairs and so we lose at the gate the idea that the words of literature function to refer to or make truth claims about reality.

\textsuperscript{13} Dolezel (1998), 24.
\textsuperscript{14} Dolezel (1998), 24.
Without these tools for bridging word and world we appear to have no way of developing the claim that literature can to be said to 'fit' with reality, or, stronger still, offer it directly in the presentation of literary content.\footnote{Properly speaking truth is a semantic value and reference, representation and correspondence are semantic relations. I use "semantic tools" as an umbrella term to cover both of these core types of semantic values and relations, to describe the most general ways in which sentential content can be said to be \textit{about} the world ('by being true of it,' 'referring to it,' etc.).}

If literary texts functioned to provide a genuine view of reality, at the very least we would have to find grounds for claiming that the descriptions found in them are guided and constrained by what happens in the real world. In ordinary speech, what connects my statement "my landlord is trying to evict me" to reality is the fact that my landlord is (actually, really, etc.) trying to evict me. In short, the connection lies in the fact that my words represent his actions. Otherwise my words are empty of world: either a lie or, if woven into a narrative line, a candidate for a work of fiction — but in neither case our-worldly. Characteristically, nearly all of the statements we find in a literary text turn out to be strictly false when applied to the actual world: that Poseidon "remained angry with the godlike Odysseus" is not true of anyone in the real world. And this is no surprise, since it does not refer to anyone in the real world. It 'refers' to the Odysseus of Homer's \textit{Odyssey}.\footnote{I use 'refer' because it might well be questionable whether we would say that the description of, for example, Odysseus in the novel \textit{refers} to this character (if we think that reference requires an actual object we run into obvious trouble here, for example).} It represents nothing real, and that we do \textit{not} thereby take the claim to be false — that we do not dismiss its content as misinformed or just wrong — brings home the fact
that questions of worldly truth and reference are irrelevant when evaluating the content of
a novel.

With only a slight hue of exaggeration, the sceptic can put it this way: *literary
texts describe their own creations*. In the very act of describing the happenings of the
story, in the very act of creating literary content, literary texts generate the characters and
events to which their descriptions ‘refer’. The descriptions and representations we find in
literary texts are ‘representations’ of constructs of language: Othello, at least the character
found in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, does not exist outside the text. So when the words of
that text describe Othello they do not reach beyond the text to any particular bit of reality.
In this sense we might see that a work of literary fiction builds its own history, one that is
expressly not, as fiction, the history of the real world (as Cavell says, with typical
Cavellian bombast, literary fiction has “the power to stipulate the world from beginning
to end”). Of course the sceptic allows that there are cases — indeed an obvious
multitude — in which what is said in a piece of literary fiction can also be said of reality,
for example that Venice is a city on the Adriatic, that Napoleon invaded Russia (and so

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17 Though it may sound initially odd to speak of ‘representation’ when there is no real object of
representation (such as when we speak of ‘fictional representation’), it is commonplace in epistemology
and metaphysics. In traditional epistemology and metaphysics, the question of whether an object’s
existence is representation dependent or independent gives us a way to distinguish fictional (non-real, in
general) and ‘real’ objects. Turning this into a global question concerning the existence of empirical
objects in general gives us one of the most standard ways to distinguish idealists and realists (the realist
believes that the existence of at least some objects is representation independent; the idealist says none is). Fredrick Schmitt captures this distinction nicely when he writes: “the situation regarding automobiles is
quite unlike that regarding Hamlet. Whatever existence Hamlet may have — and of course the realist
would and the idealist may deny he has any — would have to be endowed by the representation of Hamlet
in the play *Hamlet*. His features are created by the play’s representing them. The features of an
automobile, however, are not created by our representing them.” (Schmitt, 1995, 13.)

18 Cavell (1979), 457.
on). But this does not give us a way to argue that literature can refer to or otherwise describe reality. The Venice of Othello, however much it may match the Venice we know, includes facts in its history not found in ours. In the Venice of Othello we find a plotting Iago, a jealous Othello, the death of a certain Desdemona (and so on) until we begin to recognize that virtually every description of narrative content points up a world not quite our own. In short, it cannot be that Shakespeare is simply representing or describing Venice, however much his and our Venice may have in common. If he were describing it, there could be no mention of Othello and thus no great literary work by the same name.

Literary texts as a matter of course use features of our world in the construction of their narratives. The real world and its history provide settings for the literary; they provide a backdrop for the praxis of the novel. But literary texts do not refer to or make truth claims about this backdrop of reality, they use it. We do of course criticize a text that uses (for example) New York as its background setting yet fails to get straight the difference between Downtown and Uptown. But this is a critique of the setting’s accuracy,

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19 Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song is one of the most often cited examples of this, a novel whose narrative line follows in nearly all of its detail an actual event. Yet we find in this text, as with other historical dramas and so-called New Journalist writing, layers of imaginative invention added to the (real) events upon which he builds his story. Even in cases of what is often called metalepsis — this blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction — we find a tremendous amount of information the nature of which makes it impossible to treat the text as in any way straightforwardly representational. As soon as we find a fictionalizing embellishment in a seemingly empirically based text (characteristically descriptions of a character’s thoughts or transcriptions of historical conversations, presented not as hypotheses but as direct reports — to which the author could never be privy), we begin to see that we have lost the grounds for treating it as a genuine world-imagining text (for the reasons I give above). I examine this line of thought in more detail in chapter 4, sections 1 and 2.

20 As Lamarque and Olsen express it, we explain the presence of empirically adequate statements in texts “by invoking the category of fictional content subject to the fictive stance, that is, content of a factual nature presented in the fictive mode and integrated into a wider fictional context.” (Lamarque and Olsen, 1996, 66.)
and it is done along the lines in which we criticize a set in a play rather than an argument to the effect that the text attempts to make truth claims about the world and fails in so doing. Saying so much — claiming that accuracy of background setting is straightforwardly truth-functional or referential — would be akin to saying that the set in a production of *Street Car Named Desire* functions to make truth claims about New Orleans, which is obvious nonsense. The sceptic points out that the backdrops and settings we find in literature, just as with stage sets, are accurate or inaccurate, not true or false. They are *used*, well or badly; they are not asserted of the world, truly or falsely.

The sceptic can provide a very simple example to bring his point home. If we discovered that everything described in *Othello* transpired in the real world we would not thereby say that its assertions are made of the world. The reason for this is simple: the assertions are made of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. It is because Iago says in the text by Shakespeare “I follow him to serve my turn upon him” that we are entitled to claim that Iago is bent on revenge, regardless of what happens with any real-world playing out of Shakespeare’s tragedy. To say otherwise is to fail to grasp that talk about what happens in a literary text is conditioned solely by what is said in that text: no glimpse into empirical history plays any role in determining whether we can really say Iago is bent on revenge in *Othello*. For we would never — and this is built into our idea of reading something as literature — claim that it is *false* that Shakespeare’s Iago is bent on revenge if the play failed to match empirical history just at this point alone. We would not say that Shakespeare’s *Othello* blunders at this point because history does not entitle him to claim so much of Iago.
As we have seen (and as we already knew) empirical history does not bestow upon a literary text the right to speak about its characters and events as it so chooses (as we might say that it is because Caesar was murdered that a historian has the right to make this claim). We might say that Shakespeare is a prophet (or a thief) if we find that his writings match history. But we would not say that we have found grounds for claiming that literary language can be seen as retaining the standard semantic functions of non-literary uses of language simply because it contains descriptions that turn out to be empirically adequate. Even in those cases where we find statements which also can be applied correctly to the world (and they are characteristically few and trivial: there would be nothing interesting in a humanism which supports itself on the sundry historical and geographical descriptions found in a text), the sceptic reasonably points out that in the literary text they are used (and certainly read) as ‘facts’ about the narrative line, serving to illuminate it rather than what lies outside it. Italo Calvino reminds us of this when he begins his famous novel with the following request:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade.

Superficial points of contact between the world of the reader and that of the literary text will hold of course: “hat” in a literary text still means ‘hat’ and “pain” still means ‘pain’. The sceptic is not a fool. He does not remove novels so far from reality that he destroys this obvious condition of the intelligibility of literature. He accounts for this by pointing out that literary texts retain the sense of our terms, and thus the words and descriptions we find in world-constructing texts retain their standard meaning. The sceptic
might put it like this: the system we find in bookstores of shelving texts into literary-fiction and nonfiction sections turns out to be done along the lines of Frege’s famous distinction between sense and reference. Literature and world-directed texts share the same language, generally put. They both participate in the same Sinn; but literary language stays on the level of Sinn whereas in standard (empirical) use language takes the extra step of applying these words to the actual world. And if we cast it this way, the sceptic shows that this commonality of meaning, this sharing of mere sense, does nothing to bring literature into contact with our world. Literature, the sceptic might say, begins the race with all of other forms of writing; it stands along with them on the line of meaningful speech. It is that just literature stays there, whereas other forms of writing go forward to apply words to reality, to make the leap to worldly reference and hence world-directed speech.

The sceptic leaves us with the following picture: since worldly truth, reference, and (more generally) representation do not guide — indeed are absent from — the literary use of language, literature cannot present to us a direct vision of world. It is because of the

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21 The following characterization of Frege is fairly common in literary theory. It has its roots in the following observation in *On Sense and Reference*: “In hearing an epic poem we are...interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for the attitude of scientific investigation. Hence it is a matter of no concern for us whether the name ‘Odysseus’ has reference, so long as we accept the poem as a work of art.” (Frege, 1970, 63.) It is often argued that the independence of sense and reference implied here does not square well with Frege’s general philosophy (it is common to claim that in Fregean semantics there can be no sense without reference), but this is another concern, one which will take us too far afield to explore here.

22 For better or worse, depending on one’s bent. This idea might underlie the anti-literary argument that literature is trivial. It also underlies many of the structuralist and poststructuralist notions that in literature language examines itself, drawing attention to word rather than to what the word signifies (think, if you
semantic functions of language, because language gets beyond itself as it were and latches onto something external to it, that it is not hopelessly self-referential. Indeed it is because of this system of reference, of (to cast the net wider) mirroring and imaging the actual, that words can aspire to be revelatory of something called reality, that they can aspire to be a transcription of the world of the speaker. The sceptic brings to our attention the fact that literary language cannot be described this way, and thus humanism, requiring as it does that literary language describes the our-worldly, looks like a hopeless position. Humanism asks us to accept that literature informs us about our world when the very nature of literary language, its wedding of words to fictions, makes it tremendously difficult to find anything that is real enough in a literary text to establish a significant point of contact with our world. And so in this way the sceptic argues that making sense of a direct humanist approach is impossible.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{23}\) I have omitted here a discussion of ways some older versions of humanism have grappled with this, namely the idea that literature can be seen as describing reality by referring to or representing *universals and types*, making claims about the world in this sense. With the exception of Richard Gaskin (1997) and Graham Martin (1982), I am unaware of any prominent current philosopher or literary theorist who takes this idea seriously. To give a hint of what an argument against this would look like, traditionally humanists who rely on reference and representation in forging the connection between literature and world employ notions of mimesis or verisimilitude to secure reference. They argue from the claim that fictions are mimeses of general properties (say ‘jealousy’) — universals in this sense — to the conclusion that they somehow function to describe or represent these universals. But this clearly will not work. A *mimetic* relation specifies what sort of resemblance one thing has to another; a referential relation specifies how *descriptions function to make claims about something*. One cannot siphon a referential relation from a mimetic one, and so a humanism based on mimetic relations will fail to make sense of how fictions function to refer to or describe universals. Thus as a ground for humanism it is untenable, for it will not offer a way of seeing how literary language can be seen as *speaking* about the our-worldly. From Anna Karenina’s mimetic success, from the fact that she looks and behaves so much like a *type* of person — say (for convenience) the Suffering Lover — we may well find in the real world, we cannot argue that her lifelike-ness is *asserting or saying something about this type* (whatever it exactly would be). But this is...
1.3 Isolationist Drifts

As I said earlier, it is wrong to think that the sceptic is anti-literary. He begins his recital not as a spoilsport (as perhaps the logical positivists did when it came to questions of aesthetics), simply denying that texts have anything significant to say to us about ourselves and asking that we turn our attention to more serious affairs. He wants, and for reasons that are respectable, to remind us of the old idea that we should take art for art’s sake, to treat a literary text as an object of appreciation in its own right. And he sees his arguments as giving necessity to these claims. He sees the upshot of his scepticism about humanism as showing us that we must turn our attention from what the literary text does not and cannot touch (reality) and direct it towards its proper object, the text itself. Thus it is not that the sceptic wants to take away the humanist’s desire to find genuine value in literature. He rather wants to correct what he sees as the humanist’s desire to locate value always in insights into reality (the sceptic might be seen as asking us to see literature as offering an alternative realm of value, and so expanding value in this sense rather than trying to fit it always into the same box: worldly understanding). He wants to prevent us from trying to make literature a window to the world — and thus something we do not properly look at but through — instead of a free-standing source of its own value. The sceptic, as we find him in contemporary critical theory and philosophy of literature, does not end with his argument that literature cannot show us world but rather begins with it,

precisely what a humanistic theory of literary representation would need. Representation and in general mimesis-based forms of humanism seem philosophically naïve for these reasons.
using this as a call to explore other, more properly aesthetic and textual, possibilities of involvement and appreciation.

Though it would be impossible to offer something like an adequate map of the different ways contemporary theorists express this scepticism in offering their accounts of literature, we might speak fairly of ‘drifts’, and characterize the two drifts most dominant (in Anglo-American universities and scholarship at least) as the ‘poststructuralist drift’ and the ‘analytic drift.’ Philosophers and critics such as Barthes, de Man and most notably Derrida undeniably float along the poststructuralist,24 while philosophers such as Walton, Searle, Lamarque and Currie float comfortably along the analytic (philosophers such as Rorty and Eco might be seen as having a foot in both, though clearly starting out in different drifts themselves). There is often a tremendous antagonism between the two drifts, exemplified wonderfully in the famous debate between Derrida and Searle,25 which resulted, depending on who you talk to, as either revealing the inherent nonsense of poststructuralist thought or the naïve and nearly puritanical confines of contemporary analytic philosophy. I would agree with Rorty that the animosity inclines towards exaggeration and is usually misplaced, often boiling down to not much more than a tendency to criticize a theorist because she fails to speak in the vocabulary of a traditional Anglo-American philosopher or a French literary critic (depending on the drift from

24 At least Barthes by the time he wrote SZ (1974), which marks his transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. For the classic works of these poststructuralist authors, see also Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference (1978), and Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (1979).
within which one is doing the criticizing). At any rate, here I have little interest in the antagonism or arguing for one drift over the other. To be sure, what I want to draw attention to in this section is that from the vantage-point of the humanist they look much more like allies than is often noticed.

Perhaps the best way to bring the basics of the poststructuralist drift into view is to explain what it is a reaction to: structuralist linguistics and criticism (in particular that of Saussure). Structuralists argued that meaning is not immanent in a sign or linguistic unit but rather a product of the relations of different units to one another. The word "tree" has meaning, for example, not because it bears some intrinsic or natural correlation with the extra linguistic items with which we are all familiar. Meaning is made possible only in the structure of a language, a function of the way in which the system relates linguistic items to one another and in so doing marks out the roles they play in a language. Meaning is made possible by, indeed is grounded in, these differential relations rather than a function of isolated matches between word and world (hence the Structuralist dictum that meaning is 'relational' and not 'substantial'). As Structuralists often said: meaning is difference, a function of a system of differentiation.


27 Most notably Saussure's Course in General Linguistics (1974). It may be an overstatement to say — nowadays at least — that poststructuralism is a reaction to structuralism, though it certainly grew into a position as a reaction to structuralism and is fruitfully understood in this light (as Wittgenstein's later philosophy is well described as a reaction to his own earlier writings and those of Russell and Frege).
This picture of meaning as relational is the first pillar of structuralist accounts of meaning. The second pillar is the so-called ‘unity’ of signifier and signified. In virtue of this stable structure of ‘difference’, the items within the system, words or signifiers, can be related to signifieds, the concepts expressed by words (the word “tree” as related to the concept of tree, for example). We take the relations of words, of signifiers understood as marks and noises, and relate them to ‘signifieds’. And this unity of signifier and signified in turn blows sense into the sounds we make and scribbles we write, producing the basic unit of communication: the ‘sign’ (“tree” as a linguistic vehicle for expressing the concept Tree). The structure of the language can change and shift as much as it wants: as long as it provides a stable differentiation of signs it can account for the determinacy of meaning, for a sturdy system of relations between signifiers and signifieds.

The most convenient way to characterize the diverse bodies of work that make up the poststructuralist drift is to say that the poststructuralist accepts the first pillar of structuralism but rejects the second: language is difference but there is no firm or fixed relationship between signifier and signified and so no genuine stability of meaning.\(^{28}\) It is often hard to find an argument for this, in the sense of some unified or generally accepted way of stating why signifiers never fully yield a signified. And this, I am inclined to think,

\(^{28}\) In *The Limits of Interpretation* (1994) Umberto Eco draws attention to Derrida’s dependence on a particular argument given by C.S. Peirce. We might quote Peirce’s argument here, if only because one might find it helpful to see my above gloss of the poststructuralist drift expressed in a more familiar vocabulary (if we replace ‘representation’ with ‘signifier’ and ‘sign’ in the obvious places the point of comparison should be clear): “The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing can never be completely stripped off: it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally the interpretant is nothing but another representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.” (Pierce, 1969, 32.)
is largely because many poststructuralists accomplish this severing of signifier and signified in the act of analyzing specific texts, generalizing their claims based on their critical discoveries (poststructuralism, as is well known, is most popular as a critical movement).²⁹

Nevertheless, we can get at the basic poststructuralist insight as follows. We noticed that for the structuralist the correlation between signifier and signified is expressed in the sign, and that the determinacy of the sign (what makes it this sign) is a product of the differential relations of all of the signs in the language. And we might see a tension here. Nothing outside of the relation between signs fixes the meaning of a sign. This much is implied by the structuralist view of meaning; and the poststructuralist argues that a system of difference between signs is just not the sort of thing that can secure determinacy of meaning. There turns out to be no way of limiting the relations that constitute the meaning of a sign and so no way of fully capturing the meaning of a sign. If the specification of what makes a sign this sign is a matter of its relations to the other signs in the language, so must be the specification of its meaning. So to account for the determinacy of a sign, we have to trace around the differential relations of that sign. But this search soon shows itself to be endless. There is no moment at which I come to an end

²⁹ Rorty offers a very succinct explanation of why we seem to find so little of what the analytic-minded philosopher would consider to be proper arguments for this: "When philosophers such as Derrida say things like 'there is nothing outside the text' they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantical arguments...They are not claiming to have discovered the real nature of truth, language or literature. Rather, they are saying that the very notion of discovering the nature of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon — part of what Heidegger calls "the metaphysics of presence" or "the onto-theological tradition." (Rorty, 1982, 140.) See also Graff (1979), 1-17.
of the process of difference: I am only put in contact with signs each calling for others to mark their (putative) determinacy.\(^{30}\) I am never put in touch with some sort of last-word in this structure that expresses the determinacy of a sign. And if a definitive specification of meaning cannot be had, we are no longer entitled to claim that we can close our hands over a determinate sign and thus a final, properly circumscribed meaning. The process of locating a determinate meaning is endless; meaning is always ‘deferred,’ taking a step back with every step we take towards it. Umberto Eco expresses this point wonderfully when he writes:

> Since the process foresees the unlimited shifting from symbol to symbol, the meaning of a text is always postponed. The only meaning of a text is “I mean more.” But since that “more” will be interpreted by a further “I mean more,” the final meaning of text is an empty secret.\(^{31}\)

And we should also mention Derrida’s occult but immensely influential claim that:

> If reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, towards a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or towards a signified

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\(^{30}\) It is often pointed out how much this has in common with certain mainstays of analytic philosophy since the 1950s, including scepticism about rule following but in particular Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation (and the literature on interpretation that follows in its vein). For an accessible discussion of this see Hilary Putnam (1983).

\(^{31}\) Eco (1994) 27. Eco is careful to state that instability of meaning does not imply a kind of ‘anything goes’ theory of interpretation, which many (usually uninformed) philosophers fear poststructuralism endorses (though arguably in the hands of less talented literary critics it is often used this way). As Eco puts it: “But, even though the interpreters cannot decide which interpretation is the privileged [interpretation], they can agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated. Thus, even though using a text as a playground for implementing unlimited semiosis, they can agree that at certain moments the “play of musement” can transitorily stop by producing a consensual judgement. Indeed, symbols grow but do not remain empty.” (Eco, 1994, 42.)
object outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place, outside language. There is no outside the text (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*).\(^\text{32}\)

There is a fairly obvious reason we do not often hear of poststructuralist humanists. It is very hard to see how anything about our world can be proposed, established, revealed, or shown\(^\text{33}\) in a text that does not, by its very nature, make determinate claims at all, indeed in which the words touch nothing *hors-texte*. If the sceptic of 1.2 argues against humanism by showing that *literary* language has no extra-textual reference, the poststructuralist takes his argument a step further: *language* does not connect us to the extra-linguistic, for in severing the signifier from the signified we lose our point of contact (in this respect the poststructuralist might be seen as simply extending the sceptic’s view of literature to the whole of language itself). And the resultant ‘deferral’ of meaning only makes things worse for our humanist intuition. We cannot tame a text’s semantic convolutions enough to make it a spokesperson for something outside of it, since we cannot find within it anything resembling a voice sufficiently constant and unified to be capable of such a thing. We do not have a direct vision of anything extra-textual. What we find is the free play of meaning, and for the poststructuralist reading (and in particular criticism) becomes a sort of communion with the very nature of the language, an opportunity to examine and behold the vacillation of meaning and so the steady proliferation of interpretative possibilities. The poststructuralist exchanges the humanist’s

\(^\text{32}\) Derrida (1976), 158.

\(^\text{33}\) Except, of course, the instability of language, which one might argue is a kind of showing. See Harrison (1991), for a very interesting attempt to reconcile humanism and deconstruction.
desire to find a vision of world for what she takes to be an honest view of the instability of language.

When we turn to the analytic drift we see, to continue with poststructuralist vocabulary, not a wholesale claim to the effect that there is nothing outside the text — with all of its anti-realist implications — but a picture of literature that suggests that whatever is outside of the literary text is beyond the reach of the words of that text. Much of the analytic drift of literary theory is continuous with the general analytic interest in the nature of truth, reference and correspondence. I doubt it would be much of an overstatement to say that the current analytic drift in the philosophy of literature grew out of the desire to find an adequate way to make sense of sentences and descriptions that are not false (like lies) yet are not true in any straightforward sense: in short the problem of fiction. Much of the work we find in the beginnings of this drift, from Macdonald, Isenberg and Beardsley onwards, has the shape it does because of the way in which theorists wrestled with this problem. What we see in this drift is a palpable preoccupation with the philosophical/linguistic problems raised by the element of fictionality in literature; and the overriding interest becomes one of showing that while we do not take literary texts’ descriptions to be fact, we nevertheless do not, as Russell once appeared content to claim, read them as a continuous string of simply false claims.

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34 Whatever this might precisely mean. Rorty has been attacked for treating it as the claim that there are nothing but texts, the so-called thesis of strong-textualism.

35 See Margaret MacDonald (1954), Arnold Isenberg, (1954), and Monroe C. Beardsley (1981).

36 Bertrand Russell (1962), 277.
We might divide the popular contemporary approaches in the analytic drift into the ‘modal’ and ‘imaginative’ theories. The modal and imaginative strains are not competing schools in the analytic drift; and I should make clear that this is a distinction of convenience — we are trying to characterize a considerable mass of theories here — rather than an account of incompatible general outlooks (philosophers of both strains can, and do, borrow freely from one another). Modal theories tend to speak of fictional worlds as special classes of possible worlds. It is a method that was given its best known contemporary philosophical formulation by David Lewis; and theorists such as Dolezel, Eco (at least his foray into his ‘small worlds’ theory) and Pavel have worked it into vigorous theories of literary-fictive understanding. The problem of fiction in literature here becomes somewhat like the problem of counterfactuals in logic, one of describing the mechanism which allows a writer to describe actions and events that never actually occurred (or allows a reader to understand statements made about them: how we are able to make truth-valued and referential statements about non-actual states of affairs, for example). The imaginative theorists, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the type of attitude that is invited by the work of fiction. Walton’s mimesis as make-believe theory is the best known and most influential, finding expression in the philosophy of such

37 Typically as incomplete possible worlds, since “only some conceivable statements about fictional entities are decidable” (Dolezel, 1998, p. 22). As the argument often goes: with a genuine possible world there are in principle grounds for determining the truth-value of every statement we can make about it. This condition does not hold in fictional possible worlds, since there is nothing to establish the truth of claims such as “Othello’s great grandfather was a sailor,” or (following the common example) “Sherlock Homes had X number of hairs on his head” — the texts are completely indeterminate in respect to the truth values of these sentences.

prominent writers in the field as Currie, Olsen and Lamarque. Here it is argued that just as children use sticks and stones as swords and bombs in a game of make-believe, when adults read literature they use words much the same way. We do not believe what we read in *Othello*, since we cannot believe a sentence (or a text composed of sentences) we know is not true. But we can make-believe them, and so we treat Shakespeare’s descriptions in *Othello* as props for our imaginative involvement in the story line.

Very few philosophers except Walton himself are happy to use the term ‘game’ to describe this (for one thing it hints that literary involvement is less than properly serious); but it is impossible to overstate how widespread the use of the notion of make-belief is (and cognate attitudes) in the contemporary analytic drift. What the imaginative theorists have in common is the starting point of accepting that texts assert nothing about how things stand in the world — they have neither truth nor reference. But they recognize that if we stopped there, literature, and particularly the role it plays in a culture, would be utterly mysterious. The imaginative theorist tries to bring literary fiction back to us as a respectable, autonomous cultural practice; and she does this by investigating the ability of non-epistemic attitudes to ground the possibility of entering into a fictional world and appreciating it as *something* though we know all the while that it is really nothing at all.39

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39 I would think that this is one of the reasons that literary theorists often find the modal approach more attractive than the imaginative: the modal theory at least leaves open the possibility that we can have non-imaginative or rather a type of genuine epistemic attitude in literary appreciation, in so far as we can have a sort of epistemic relation to possible worlds (and by extension the fictional species of these worlds). I would think that this is what attracts so many professional literary theorists to model strains in the analytic drift, as it does not force on us the implication that our relation to a fictional world is akin to a child’s relations to his toys. I discuss some of these problems in 4.2.
It would be an exaggeration to say that philosophers of the analytic drift are anti-humanists. But as we might already have noticed this drift shares in common with the sceptic the picture of literary content as presenting to view something essentially otherworldly, and so it is not a particularly inviting position for the humanist. The sceptical position I developed is essentially a way of drawing out the implications of the claim that functions as a starting point in the analytic drift: the descriptions found in literature are not asserted of the world. Our sceptic simply turns his attention to the implications this carries for the idea of humanism, how very far this takes the literary from the our-worldly. If the first thing we have to say about our involvement in literary fiction is that (following the modal theorist) it concerns possible worlds, or (following the imaginative theorist) it subsumes the world of the text into an object of make-belief — an imagined world — then the idea of seeing reality in a literary text is made utterly mysterious. The idea that literature is otherworldly is built into the analytic drift: it tells us that novels offer us either make-believed worlds or worlds that are possible and so not quite our own. Although there may not be the antagonism to the humanist intuition that we often find in the poststructuralist drift, the idea of a direct vision of reality is disqualified. If we set up the problem as philosophers of the analytic drift do, we immediately invite the sceptic's recital, for all the sceptic's arguments flow from the way

\[40\] In 4.2 I argue that the picture of humanism I develop may in fact be compatible with modal theories of fiction. But we need an alternative to the sceptic's notion of literary language (I give this in the next chapter) before we can begin discussing this.

\[41\] Or whatever combination of *possibilia* and *imaginatio* one might build into his theory: modal and imaginative theories needn't be seen as exclusive positions, since a possible world can be treated as an imagined world and so forth. One can, I suppose, be a sort of modal-imaginative theorist.
in which the world-word relation is cast in the analytic drift. The analytic drift begins with
the notion that the normal semantic functions of language are lacking in literature, and the
sceptic merely taps the humanist on the shoulder and points out what this means for him.
There is just nothing more to say here, silenced just as we were when the sceptic began his
recital.

There is one very important respect in which we can see a shared picture in the
poststructuralist and analytic drifts, one which shows them, at least in the eyes of the
humanist, to have the same water running under them. The nature of the assumption is
well expressed by Eric Miller:

> From such a foundational commitment to reference and correspondence-truth
> flows the rest of the scientific world-view: the dualism of referring expression
> and referent...of sentence and fact, theory and data, language and world,
culture and nature. The presentation of literature as the quasi-negation of this
ontology changes nothing. The dualism of reference still functions as its
conceptual starting point, its _arche._\(^{42}\)

The humanist’s sceptic trades on this dualism: it is the distinction upon which he
places the wedge between world-constructing and world-imaging texts, between uses of
words that latch on to the world and those that do not. And with little effort we can see
how this underlies both drifts’ expression of the sceptic’s insight that what is outside of
the literary text is beyond the reach of the words of the text. Both drifts accept that for
language to be informative of the extra-linguistic it must build a bridge between word and
world (via reference, correspondence, representation, uniting signifier with signified, etc.).

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\(^{42}\) Eric Miller (1996), 475-486.
It is irrelevant that the poststructuralist makes the global claim that this bridge can *never* be built, be it in literary language or standard everyday speech. The arguments of the humanist's sceptic flow prior to any answer we might give to this question of whether language can touch world. They flow directly from the question itself. This division of word and world into distinct realms that require bridging if language is to touch reality — regardless of whether or not one believes the bridge can actually be built — is the source of the sceptic's view of literature: *this* is what gives him the picture of the world and word relation upon which he begins his recital. Without much overstatement the humanist can claim that poststructuralists just look like philosophers of the analytic drift who happen to have a much more despairing stance towards global epistemological and linguistic questions.43 While this may be of severe importance in other areas of philosophical concern, when it comes to literature it means nothing to the humanist. At the end of the day philosophers of the analytic and poststructuralist drifts look to the humanist to be right in bed with one another: in both cases we begin with the word-world picture the sceptic exploits and end with the sceptic's view that literary texts are hermetically sealed, referentially isolated strings of words. The problem of literary language unites natural foes, or at any rate two drifts we often take to express radically different philosophical visions.

43 We might say with just a bit of playful exaggeration that if the poststructuralist gave up his position that signifiers cannot be united with signifieds, if he defaulted on this his own scepticism, he would merely begin floating along the analytic drift, a drift that from the humanist’s perspective is no more inviting.
The arguments against the possibility of direct-humanism we have been examining in this chapter are often described as arguments for the ‘self-referentiality’ of literary texts, and I want to point out a confusion in this way of putting the matter before going on. We can accept that literary language does not refer to anything external to the text. But this does not imply that the words and descriptions of a text are in any literal sense self-referential. The concept of self-reference, though it has a perfectly normal everyday use (to capture the idea that a work of literary fiction describes its own world and not ours, for example), defies philosophical use here. As Miller brings to our attention, honest cases of self-reference require something like token-reflexivity (“this is a lie”, said in reference not to another statement but to itself), and all of literary language cannot, obviously, be assimilated to a case of token-reflexivity. What is meant by claiming that literary language is self-referential can be captured with more philosophical insight by claiming that literature turns out to look very much like a localized case of the way in which the idealist views the world. The sceptic’s position gives us a picture of literature as semantically isolated in the way in which the linguistic idealist’s words are ‘isolated’: the world of the text is a mere construct of the words of the text (as the linguistic idealist believes the ‘objects’ of reference to be linguistic constructs). In normal uses of language, uses that bring us into intimate contact with the world, some actual feature of the real world is the target of our words, its terminus as it were. In literary texts we find only more

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44 Eric Miller (1996), 478.
and more words when we ask about the objects of reference: we never can break out of the text and ground the semantic reach of those words in something our-worldly.

The humanist's sceptic thus shows himself to be what we might call the literary isolationist, a position that has been lying just underneath the surface of his arguments as we have traced them from indirect humanism to their role in the poststructuralist and analytic drifts. Of course the sceptic allows for certain points of contact between literary texts and world. But as we have seen they are either of trivial benefit to the humanist (sameness of Sinn) or have no proper literary significance (indirect humanism; the use of world in constructing setting and scenario). The sceptic isolates the text from any significant connection, from any direct point of contact that is at once interesting from both the perspective of the world and that of the literary text. He puts forth the constraint that we must speak of what we find in a literary work when describing the significance of a literary text. He shows us that we must speak from the voice of the text and base what we say about it on what we find within it. In short, he shows us that we must respect its autonomy (as is easily done by making the world of a literary text a sui generis possible or imagined world, or by claiming that "il n'y a pas de 'hors-texte'"). And he points out that once we speak from the position of literature, we find that with every attempt to touch external reality we either knock our heads against the fictionality in which the text is draped or we scrape our shins against its textual autonomy. Unless he finds another route, the humanist is defeated by the sceptic's isolationism, left with the sceptic's idealist picture of literary language. And all of this is done on the force of the sceptic's simple and reasonable claim that none of the requisite semantic functions guides the language we find in the literary work of art.
Linguistic Humanism

Language is everywhere hopelessly infected by the extra-linguistic.

—Bernard Harrison

THERE IS CERTAINLY something unique about literary language, talking as it does in full freedom from the truth and the facts. And the sceptic brings to our attention that this implies that there is something quite peculiar about the humanist intuition. If the humanist wants to say that literature makes claims about reality, the sceptic argues that there is no semantic tool we can invoke to explain how this might be possible. So we seem to be silenced, left without a word to say about how a work of literary fiction can speak directly about the our-worldly. Unless we are willing to summon the desperate category of the ineffable, as older versions of humanism were often content to do,¹ and try to make a

¹ The allusion here is to the Scrutinists’s notion of ‘Life’ and the New Critics’ notion of the ‘Concrete Universal’ and ‘The Eternal’ (see chapter 1, fn. 3.), both of which have taints of the ineffable. The idea in both cases is that the vision (of ‘life’; of the ‘eternal’) the text offers is inseparable from the text itself. This in turn implies that there is no explaining these insights by way of paraphrasing the text into an argument or interpreting it until we can elicit a (detachable, as it were) proposition. We can just present someone with the text and say that she either gets it or she doesn’t (somewhat as we say that we cannot show why a joke is funny apart from repeating the joke itself: no satisfactory discursive account of what
convenient virtue out of this silence, we have to nod our heads to the sceptic. He is both convincing and reasonable, and this much should be granted him. So we do appear — at this point at least — to be without any linguistic resource for describing how a use of language can have a worldly object when it fails to run along those semantic rails that account for the connecting of word and world. We do not have worldly reference, truth, representation (et cetera), and thus we have no clear way of explaining how literary texts might reveal reality in their descriptions of their own imaginatively created characters and events. We can, along with the indirect humanist, console ourselves in literature’s ability to propose, hint at, and in various other ways suggest stances towards the world. But we also saw that this is of no substantial literary significance, that indeed it takes us away from the text rather than bringing us closer to it. What we saw the humanist needs, and what the sceptic appears to have shown he cannot have, is an immediate point of contact, a way of explaining how world might be yielded directly in the literary use of language.

There is, as far as I can see, no promise in challenging the sceptic head-on. We would do best to acquiesce and accept that the areas his argument touched on are lost to the humanist. To be sure, I would say that the sceptic has given the boundaries of any discussion of literary language, an idea of where we cannot go if we want to stay in touch with the literary. And most importantly, I think that he is unequivocally correct to demand that we must do justice to what he has shown us is an essential call of any account of literary involvement: to respect the autonomy of literature. Arguing for humanism in such

makes it humorous is possible). I discuss this in greater detail in 3.1 when I go over the thesis of the so-called “heresy of paraphrase.”
a way that we turn literature into a mere springboard for connecting us to the extra-textual would be a violence to the idea of the literary, to the practice of treating the literary text as an object of appreciation in its own right. We accept, then, both the sceptic's picture of literary language and his call to respect the autonomy of literature, and so the obvious question becomes: what is the humanist to do?

We begin by accepting that we cannot show literature to be our-worldly in the respect the sceptic has denied it can be. Instead, we try to support humanism along the lines of another picture altogether, fully giving up the tools the sceptic has argued are lost to the humanist. The humanist can let the sceptic's various arguments stand as they are: besides being persuasive they are sincere expressions of the literary. The thorn is the picture of literature the sceptic believes follows from his recital, this picture of literary texts as each sketches of the idealist's vision of the world. In short, the trouble lies in his literary isolationism, the moral he draws from his recital. And this is what I will show we can avoid, the concluding isolationist picture of literature the sceptic siphons from his various arguments.

2.1 The Picture of Paradox

The humanist intuition has had the scent of paradox ever since it was introduced in the last chapter. Indeed the sceptic's arguments make it look as though humanism is best described as built upon paradox, a desire to understand literature in terms of precisely what literature turns out to be contrasted with: a vision of the way the world is. Whatever
else a paradox may be, when we are on the receiving end of one it means that we cannot say what we want because asserting so much appears to be senseless: our desideratum is unfortunately also an impossibility. So far the sceptic has told us this: the humanist intuition is paralyzed because language offers no way to develop this intuition: a use of language that has neither (worldly) truth or reference cannot make claims about reality. So we humanists feel — and here lies the exact source of paradox — that stating what we think we see in literature requires claiming that literature is what the sceptic has shown us it is not: an account of the our-worldly. It feels that asserting humanism requires uttering a contradiction, that we naïvely attempt to embrace an impossibility.

Yet why, precisely, do we feel the presence of paradox? Why does the humanist appear to be faced with an impossibility? The sceptic responds by simply repeating his recital: he tells us that he has already answered this question. And at first we do feel the tug of necessity here, we do feel that there is just no other option open to the humanist after the sceptic has given his arguments. But with a few moment's reflection we can see that isolationism does not simply fall in fine a priori fashion from the sceptic’s recital, as, say, idealism does from Berkeley’s famous *esse est percipi*. In the latter case, the position is implied by the very words used to state the argument: it just says so much. The same is not true of our sceptic’s isolationism. Saying that literature has neither (worldly) truth nor reference does not in any straightforward sense just amount to the claim that there is no point of contact between world and literature. Indeed, all the humanist asks for is a *substantial* point of contact, and nowhere in the characterization of the intuition were the words “truth” or “reference” used, no precise semantic commitments to the mode of contact between text and world were made. There is an implicit assumption we need to
uneart, something that explains why we feel the force of entailment — we need to ask what gives us this sense that isolationism is a consequence of the sceptic’s recital.

As with most cases in which we feel the presence of paradox without quite seeing its source, there is a larger picture in place, exerting its force on us from behind the scenes. This is what is happening here: there is another commitment, some more basic picture we are beholden to, in virtue of which we feel the sceptic’s arguments leading us directly to literary isolationism. We know that what summons isolationism are the sceptic’s arguments against the presence of worldly truth and reference in literature. So the question becomes: what makes us think that we have no significant worldly contact without them, what makes us think that the humanist is silenced just because of their absence? What we feel, in feeling the pull of isolationism, is that these semantic tools build the exclusive routes of worldly insight and illumination: this is the idea the sceptic exploits. And what this betrays is that we are in the grip of a certain picture of how word and world are basically hooked up. We feel that there is a divide between language and reality, a gap that requires the semantic tools the sceptic has taken from the humanist to be bridged. We feel that this divide is revealed, exposed, in literature, that literature is in effect a testament to its existence.² The sceptic’s argument that these semantic tools are unavailable to the humanist has so much force because of the role these tools play in this picture. They are the tools for bringing language to bear on reality, and naturally we feel

² So much was suggested in 1.1 and 1.2 when we examined the sceptic’s argument that without reference we have mere sense, words with meaning but no worldly involvement. We saw it even more clearly in 1.3 when we examined the so-called ‘dualism of reference’ implied in the poststructuralist and analytic drift.
that the humanist is lost when they are taken from him. Without them we appear to be left with mere language, words with no worldly point of contact. We feel in this case that we have no possible way of bringing language into contact with a bit of independent, objective reality. Our readiness to accept isolationism is explained in terms of how we hear his arguments. And we do so standing on this more basic picture of the word-world relation, that of a gap between language and reality that can only be bridged by the semantic tools that the sceptic has turned against the humanist.

The idea of the divide is at best metaphorical, though two thousand years of debates between idealists and realists have provided many occasions to invoke the picture of a separation in kind between the conventional and the natural, language and reality. It is a philosophical rather than an empirical presupposition, a picture that has arisen from our reflections on the nature of language and truth rather than a phenomenon we come into contact with in everyday life. It is the idea of the gap between world and word that we must bridge if our words are to connect us to reality, the picture — however one precisely wants to describe it — that informs many of philosophy of language’s basic dualisms, that of the divide between (to play on the famous Sellarsian\(^3\) distinction) the logical space of nature and the logical space of language, between the things we talk about and the things in themselves, between the natural and the conventional, world and language.

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\(^3\) It is actually McDowell who puts the Sellars in this Sellarsian distinction. In *Mind and World* (1996) McDowell describes his distinction between the logical space of nature and the logical space of reasons as Sellarsian in spirit, which it certainly is. What Sellars actually spoke about was the logical space of reason, without the complementary ‘nature’ side of McDowell’s distinction.
The picture, I would think, can be illustrated in a great number of ways, but for our purposes we might express it as follows. It tells us that language and world are separated by a window, if you like. When language speaks about reality, it looks out of the window and describes what it sees. It attempts to mirror or, as it is more commonly put, 'represent' what is on the other side of the window. When we explain the relationship between a linguistic representation and its object, we invoke the common distinctions between a referring expression and its referent, a word and the bit of world to which it corresponds, reality and our sentential renderings of it. We look through the window and use our words (however we want to explain this), to mirror, like landscape sketchers, what we see. The idea of wedding word and world becomes a question of representational accomplishment (again however we want to develop this), of whether what we say when we look out the window is fair portrait of how things stand on the other side.4

It is a picture of this sort, I submit, that explains why we are left with the feeling that we are faced with an impossibility when we give up the semantic tools the sceptic has shown are unavailable to us. How can we, if we have a picture of this sort in place, see

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4 Should one find this way of putting it unfamiliar, I use these metaphors of maps, mirrors and windows as a way of explaining traditional realism & idealism as it is found in various 'representational,' 'metaphysical', or 'transcendental' interpretations of these positions. Crispin Wright gives an excellent characterization of the picture that underlies these views. "A reasonable pre-theoretical characterization of realism about, say, the external world seems to me that it...concerns the independence of the external world — for example that the external world exists independently of us, that it is independent of the conceptual vocabulary in terms of which we think about it, and that it is independent of the beliefs about it which we do, will, could, ever form. Fully fledged, modesty has it that human thought is, at best, a map of the world." (Wright, 1992, 1-2.) We are speaking about language rather than thought, but the idea is the same. On this score idealism as I describe it here (as the sceptical, anti-realist strain of idealism) would be a position that accepts this picture and merely takes a sceptical stance towards our ability to justify any talk that presupposes the adequacy of the 'map'. I refer, when needed, to these traditional positions as expressed as a point about the word-world relation as linguistic realism and linguistic idealism.
literature as ever connecting us to the world? When reference, and correspondence (and so on) drop out, we lose the idea that a use of language can describe the actual, and with this picture in place we cannot even envision an alternative mode of contact: humanism is made utterly senseless. For the question obviously becomes: since literature does not look out of this window when it speaks — since it does not even attempt to mirror the actual, to refer to and represent the real — how could it possibly have anything to say that is genuinely informative of the world external to it? We just cannot imagine what a point of contact would look like if we speak of literature within this framework of the word-world relation.

We also can see, as was hinted at in the discussion of the analytic and poststructuralist drifts, why traditional realist and idealist standpoints — standpoints which in various ways endorse this idea of the divide — are so inimical to the humanist. It is commonplace to speak of traditional linguistic idealism and realism as revolving around the same axis, around what is best described as a representationalist view of our connection to the world. The realist, to put it crudely, emphasizes the plausibility of the idea that our semantic tools actually connect us to the world: he has faith in both the view we have from the window and our language’s ability to capture what is on the other side of it. He trusts in reference to yield worldly referents, representations to unite us with the worldly objects they picture. The idealist (at least of the sceptical and anti-realist variety), again to put it crudely, argues that as far as we have the right to claim the window might just as well be a mirror — that all we are justified in claiming is that our representations are reflections of our own linguistic categories and conventions, yielding a view of what is
on our side of the window rather than the objects the realist believes are on the other side of it.

Both standpoints make humanism an impossible position. In the idealist’s world we haven’t the right to speak of literature as connecting us to the way the world is because no use of words does: idealism makes all uses of language resemble the sceptic’s isolationist view of literature — words cut off from the way the world is — and so it is of no help to the humanist’s search to find reality in literature. To be sure, even in the idealist’s world literature would still be contrasted with uses of language that function to refer to and represent the ‘facts’ of our linguistically constructed reality, and thus the sceptic simply repeats his recital in the vocabulary of an idealist. On the realist picture humanism is equally disgraced: for reasons we already are aware of literary language just shows itself to fail to function in step with those uses of language that have access to the window, with those uses of language that attempt to represent and mirror reality. It is irrelevant whether we take a realist or idealist stance towards the divide, for as long as there is one we have lost humanism. As soon as the divide is in place, humanism becomes a hopeless position.

The view of language that forces isolationism on us is this picture in which the relationship between word and world is cast in terms of an initial opposition, a picture that tells us that they remain divided from one another until we succeed in uniting them by

5 I discuss this in detail in 4.1 when I examine the thesis of ‘panfictionalism’. By “facts of our constructed linguistic reality” I am stating the obvious fact that even the most recalcitrant idealist would admit that we do not confuse the story of a novel with social history, and thus there is still a contrast between fictional and non-fictional uses of language in the idealist’s universe.
way of representation. As intuitive and entrenched as this picture of the word-world relation may be, it is not compulsory. It has been widely attacked by philosophers working in the tradition in which, as Blackburn puts it, “Wittgenstein is admired as the high priest.” This tradition distinguishes itself from representationalist and other divide-endorsing pictures by refusing to cast the relation between world and word in terms of a basic opposition. It operates, we might say, outside of the traditional debates of realism and idealism/anti-realism, and it does so by casting aside the notion of this gap we must find a way to bridge. Hilary Putnam, in what I think is the most succinct statement available of this alternative to the picture of language that forces the humanist to embrace paradox, writes:

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call “language” or “mind” penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being mappers of something “language independent” is fatally compromised from the very start.

What is so interesting about this alternative picture, and more generally the philosophical tradition that underlies it, can be best expressed if seen as an inversion of a very traditional question. It asks us to approach the understanding of the word-world relation by beginning not with the standard question how does word inform us of world?

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7 None of what I say in the following pages should be taken as implying that no talk of representation is allowed, and I do not want the argument I am initiating here to imply that this idea must be stripped from our vocabulary. In his Dewey Lectures Putnam is particularly enlightening on this point, arguing that “giving up the idea of representations as interfaces [between word and world] requiring a ‘semantics’ is not the same thing as giving up on the whole idea of representation.” (Putnam, 1994, 445. My comment in brackets.)

8 Hilary Putnam (1990), 28.
but rather by turning this question around and asking *how does world inform word?* In the first case the discussion begins by asking how language might get beyond itself and touch reality, and thus the roots of the idea of the divide are in place in the very way we formulate the question. In the second case we begin by asking rather how it might be possible to see language as in some (yet unspecified) sense having world *within* it. This distinction moves us away from wondering how a purely contingent and arbitrary creature of convention such as a language might be an accurate mirror of independent, external, reality. And in its place it asks us to explore the possibility that language is informed by the world in the very building of its system of speech, indeed that world, we might say, is woven directly into the fabric of our language. It tells us that we should not see language as connecting to reality exclusively by way of representation, as though its only mode of contact is one of picturing a realm from which it is fundamentally detached. It pushes back questions of reference, representation and correspondence to only certain types of world-informed uses of language, and in so doing opens up possibilities of linguistic involvement with reality ignored on the sceptic's representationalist model of the word-world relation. It asks us to see that world is "embedded in the meaning of our words," that language "penetrates" into reality that deeply. We try to find a level at which reality is blown so directly into language that we are entitled to claim that world "is fused into the foundation of our language game." And what this will allow us to see, I will argue, is

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10 Wittgenstein, (1980), § 558. Referring to a disposition of water, what Wittgenstein says is, "This fact is fused into the foundation of our language-game."
that there is not the gap between the world and language that is presupposed in the reasoning that makes literary language look like an oddity and humanism an impossibility.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{2.2 World in Language}

There is a fear that if we speak of our connection to the world by first stating that language is our sole point of contact, we will ultimately end up being trapped by language, unable to escape it and find our way to reality. The first step in the argument I will give — Wittgenstein's argument that we cannot get between "language and its object"\textsuperscript{12} — is also the same step that is often thought to lead directly to linguistic idealism. The fear, more specifically, is that if we begin by claiming that we are linguistic creatures through and through, fully determined in what claims we can make about reality by the conceptual categories and vocabularies we inherit from our language, we will then slide hopelessly

\textsuperscript{11} Of course there is some sort of gap between world and word, namely the sort that exists when I speak falsely or mistakenly. The dangerous idea is that these two things, word and world, are divided in such a way that we conceive of them as occupying ontologically and conceptually disunited realms. As McDowell puts it, the point is that (and for our purposes we might replace "thought" with "language"): "there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought." (McDowell, 1996, p 27.)

\textsuperscript{12} This claim is often attributed to Wittgenstein (it is a phrase we find spread throughout and popularized in the writings of Rorty and Cavell). It certainly is an excellent expression of the later Wittgenstein's views, though I cannot recall a place where he actually says "one cannot get between language and its object." It is nonetheless one way of generalizing the arguments he gives for his very famous claims that "we cannot get between pain and its expression," and "when we say, and mean, such-and-such, we — and our meaning — do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean \textit{this-is-so}." (Philosophical Investigations, §245 and §95, respectively.)
into a sort of prison of pure convention, we will find ourselves locked in language as it were. We will end up, in other words, with a position that leaves us only with the contingent and arbitrary ways in which language cuts up the world rather than a view of how reality is ‘really’, ‘truly’, ‘objectively’ cut up. One of the reasons we are inclined to think this is that, still clinging to the picture of the divide, we think that opting for language is just a way of opting for the linguistic side of the divide at the exclusion of the side of reality. If we have this picture in place this just seems to follow. But, we might notice, this leaves us in the curious position of seeing our language, our perspective, our form of life, as alienating just because they are ours. We come to see language and culture as an obstruction to our connection to reality rather than an expression of it. And this, the Wittgenstein-inspired position I will elaborate tells us, is precisely what we must try to avoid. Cavell puts this point elegantly when he writes:

For Wittgenstein philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expressions. He wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge. The limitations of knowledge are no longer barriers to a more perfect apprehension, but the conditions of knowledge, überhaupt, of anything we should call knowledge.\(^{13}\)

The idea of both acknowledging that we have only a particular perspective and yet not feeling trapped by this (seeing it therefore as a ‘limitation’) is a powerful one, a thought that I think many philosophers since Wittgenstein have taken as a call to try to

\(^{13}\) Stanley Cavell (1969), 61-62.
steer a middle course between the attempt to transcend our particular way in the world and the belief that we lose reality when we find that this is impossible. There may be something initially unsettling in the idea that we cannot escape our language and hear what reality sounds like when it speaks in its own tongue. But there is also something strange about finding this unsettling. It suggests that we believe that if we are to ground what we say and think in reality or the world, we then must find a way to go beyond humans, beyond culture, beyond nature as we experience it and reality as we interact with it, beyond everything our-worldly, and anchor our words in what quite clearly falls outside of our purview. Somewhat like Socrates, who looked forward to death because he believed that only once we leave our bodies can we see Reality, we feel snared by ourselves. What Cavell is stating, and what Wittgenstein helps us to see, is that we should not feel chafed by our skin but rather find a way to show that we lose much less than we once thought by being in it. What we need to see is that reality is not so removed from us that it requires transcending our particular linguistic position to close our hand around it, through death or less dramatic but equally self-effacing maneuvers.

The following quotes from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* henceforth) offer a good point of entrance into our discussion:

Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is (*PI* §373)

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14 Expressions like “reality speaking for itself” ultimately make no sense for Wittgenstein, of course.

15 The Socrates of the *Phaedo*, that is.
Essence is expressed by Grammar (PI §371)

What Wittgenstein is attacking here is the idea of a second voice— that of reality as it ‘really’ is apart from how it is expressed in our language — that can add a claim to the effect that “you are right to say thus” when we speak about the world. And Wittgenstein means this not in the linguistic idealist’s sense that we have nothing but mere words, that nothing but mere linguistic convention plays any role in validating what we say, without any participation of the extra-linguistic (as though it is not the fact that there is a chair in the corner of my room that entitles me to claim so much but some linguistic oddity, not a ‘worldly’ fact but only a ‘wordy’ fact, whatever this might be). He means it in the sense that ‘grammatical’ rules — the constitutive rules of language — specify what we can meaningfully claim to be the case and thus we look there to see what we can sensibly say of reality. There is no sense to the idea that the justification of what we say lies fully outside of language, as though in speech we send our words out into the world and wait to see whether reality will receive them. It lies within our language, within the perspective with which we confront reality. Grammar, in the wide sense in which Wittgenstein uses the term, provides the conditions for claiming anything to be (as Aristotle often said) a this, the very condition for discerning a thing as this or that sort of thing, for speaking about anything as being something at all. The ‘essence’ of what we speak about — conceived not as a metaphysical presence but as this linguistic expression of “what kind of object anything is” — is found within our frame of reference, our language. What the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus found in logic, the later Wittgenstein finds in grammar, the
rules of everyday natural language. Whereas he once thought that the structure of an ideal logical language would reflect the structure of the real — logic was for the early Wittgenstein “the great mirror” of reality — he later came to embrace the grammar of natural language for establishing this connection between word and world.

When we ask questions about the nature of the things we speak about, we cannot think of this as implying a comparison between the ‘real’ object and the way language frames the object; it cannot be thought of as guided, even in principle, by an idea of establishing an adequate match or representational relation between the expression of world in language and the way the world really is. The reason for this should be clear: it makes no sense to think that we can step outside of our linguistic frame to query how our ‘picture’ compares to the reality it ‘depicts’. But this is not because what is outside of our frame is just unavailable to us, if we mean by this that reality lies there only we cannot see beyond our representations of it. For what we fail to notice if we think this way is that talk of representation and ‘mirroring’ is illicit at this point, at any rate uninvited by anything we have said thus far. Wittgenstein is careful to say that “essence is expressed by

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16 Wittgenstein is so associated with the idea that philosophical questions about the nature of reality are approached by way of an investigation into the grammar of natural language that it is interesting to recall how alien this was to his thinking in his earlier writings. In his writings collected in *Notebook 1914-1916*, we find the following claim, one which brings to our attention how much his views changed: “Distrust of grammar is the first requisite of philosophy.” (Wittgenstein, 1969, 106.) In any case, and as an interesting historical aside, it is fair to see the later Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar as replacing his earlier theory of the logical status of the (so-called) “Tractarian names” in the attempt to close the gap between language and world.

17 I mean “comparison” in the sense of finding grounds for claiming an adequacy of match, representational success — whatever we think, on a picture of this sort, would entitle us to claim that our words mirror reality. It seems fair to me to speak of representational realism as implying that we can speak of word comparing well or badly to world, in the simple sense that ‘realisms’ of this sort will use some
grammar" rather than a representationalist or otherwise divide-endorsing expression such as 'grammar depicts or mirrors essence,' a way of putting it that brings near what we are trying to toss aside: the window view of the world-word relation and its concomitant idea that the connection lies exclusively in an act of representing another realm. (This should not be read as denying that there are perfectly legitimate uses of 'representation,' of course. The idea — and this bears repeating lest Wittgenstein wrongly be read as a semantic nihilist — is that we are not to take representational relations as expressing the basic connection between word and world).

The argument here is the first step in showing the idea of a divide between language and world to be unintelligible rather than impossible to bridge, senseless rather than an expression of a genuine limitation. We begin by accepting that 'language tells us what kind of object anything is.' But we do not take "language" here to imply "rather than reality", as though there is a choice between the two and our opting for language intimates the absence of any participation of reality in determining the linguistic specification of "what kind of object anything is." In so doing we work to remove the threat of linguistic idealism and anti-realism — without the comparative 'rather than reality' this threat is placed at a respectable distance — with the very arguments we give against the idea that the success of language is a matter of having a proper (as Putnam likes to express the idea) 'interface' between two disunited realms. We are trying to show that we might see language and reality as fundamentally speaking in the same voice rather than explaining

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justificatory notion (warrant, superassertability: whatever one likes in the grab-bag of philosophical terms that may express this) to explain when we are entitled to claim that the world is as we picture it.
how one realm might mimic the voice of the other; and we fend off the latter idea by insisting that the comparative claim cannot be made when we describe how language most basically aligns us with world. What we will find is that looking into language is sufficient to tell us this, to answer questions about our alignment with world (hence Wittgenstein’s idea of philosophy as a ‘grammatical investigation’). It is for this reason that Wittgenstein writes, with as much sarcasm as insight:

How do I know that this color is red? — It would be sufficient to say: “I have learned English.” (PI § 381)

Language is both the expression and the limit of the view we can have of reality. But without the idea that there is in principle a voice fully distinct from and wholly independent of ours that ultimately determines the success of what we say, we lose the idea of reality as a world beyond our words and so beyond our reach. And with this we lose the sense that our language is also our limitation, our hindrance — that it cuts us off from what we once believed we needed in order to claim a union with reality. There is no role here for a picture of an external reality conceived in a way that makes us think, for example, that when I speak about the world there is a ‘sentence shaped nonsentence’ or ‘nonconceptualized configuration of the thing in itself’ that answers to the call of my words and justifies, as a sort of echo from elsewhere, the expression of reality given in our language. We cannot get between word and world and think of reality as a ‘behind-the-scene’ arbiter of what we say, for we cannot get between language and its object and countenance an idea of the ‘truth’ of what the object ‘really’ looks like when it is untouched by the possibilities language offers us for describing it. But this is not because
we are blind to reality ‘as it really is’. It is because the idea of this sort of reality is beyond coherent expression. When we invoke this world that is beyond our words, we do so without the very grounds we have for speaking, requiring as this does that we step outside of our language and so attempt to take up what Nagel calls “the view from nowhere,” that we literally stand on nothing when we attempt to form hypotheses about how well our words may match this world. At any rate a reality so removed from us would find itself with no language, no words, no common stage, no shared frame — no possible manner in which to express itself to us. And so it could not matter to us and the way we speak, as ineffable and so utterly unavailable to us as it would be.

Thus we are thoroughly linguistic creatures, though not in such a way that we can speak of being cut off from reality on account of this. The traditional linguistic idealist attempts to step outside of language and say something about the presence or absence of the world in our speech. Wittgenstein asks us to counter that we can speak sensibly about reality only with our grammar, our language. He understands the idealist as claiming that if we locate our relation to reality in language — thus giving up representationalism to establish the fundamental point of contact — this implies that nothing makes it a fact that what I say gets at reality as it is; it implies that we therefore have no business saying ‘this is φ’ rather than ‘this is merely what we call φ’. Yet once we put it like this we can see that the idealist buys into the same confusion as the metaphysical realist in making this argument: he thinks that we can speak from the perspective of what is beyond our language and ask language transcendent questions about whether our language gets the world right. Putnam, in reproaching Rorty for claiming that “there is no way the world is”,
accuses him of trying to say that "from a God's-eye view there is no God's-eye view."\textsuperscript{18} And there is a reason that this is a fine criticism: if you deny a particular point of view, on the pain of engaging in a performative contradiction you certainly cannot speak from that point of view in formulating your denial. Indeed both the traditional linguistic idealist and realist are to be seen as attempting something like this: they each want to step outside of language and make a claim from an impossible extra-linguistic position. They want to speak from a God's-eye view about our ability to get at reality as it 'really' is, they want to claim that language as such can or cannot match up with the way the world is. But just as it is unintelligible to think that when we speak truly there is a language-independent voice of reality that (again, from behind the scenes) adds "this is how it really is" to our claims — vouchsafing, in some way, what we say about it — it is equally unintelligible for the idealist to add the negative "it isn't really like that (as far as we have the right to say)."\textsuperscript{19} Wittgenstein captures gracefully the very basic error of thought declared by the failure to take this point seriously:

\begin{quote}
Insofar as people think they can see the "limits of human understanding", they believe of course that they can see beyond these.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Putnam (1992), 20.

\textsuperscript{19} This is one way — with slight coloring, as it were — of getting at traditional realism's notion of truth as a (justification, verification, etc.) transcendent property. Dummet offers a very level-headed and influential way of putting it: "The fundamental tenet of realism is that any sentence on which a fully specific sense has been conferred has a determinate truth-value independently of our actual capacity to decide what the truth-value is." (Dummet, 1973, 466.)

\textsuperscript{20} Wittgenstein (1982), 15e.
The connection between language and reality is much deeper than we notice if we approach the issue only by way of wondering how words might map or mirror world. Wittgenstein insists that we cannot explain our fundamental linguistic connection to the world by examining questions of reference and representation. He wants us to see that we need to first ask the much more basic question of *what sorts of prior connection to world are presupposed in the very possibility that sentences can represent and refer*? He asks us to see that understanding the basic association between word and world requires an account of how language draws various items in the world — various bits of reality — into its grammar which it then can use as instruments or standards of representation. As he argues in his famous example, the Paris meter-stick

is the *one* thing of which one can neither say that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long...But this, of course, is not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule. —Let us imagine samples of colour being preserved in Paris like the standard metre. We define: "sepia" means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed. Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not. — We can put it like this: This sample is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented but it is an instrument of representation...It is a standard in our language-game, something with which a comparison is made. And this may be an important observation, but it is nonetheless an observation concerning our language game — our method of representation. (PI §50)

We find in this example an elegant metaphor for the relationship between grammar and representational and referential uses of language.21 The metre-stick in the above example is "not represented but is an instrument of representation" because we give it status in our

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21 See Schalkwyk (1995) for an excellent discussion of this.
language as the standard (what grammar calls ‘essence’) of being a metre long, for representing objects in the world as counting as a metre. Of course the full story of how language comes to use world as a standard of representation will be more complex than this. In the case of simple objects such as chairs and rocks, the story may be the fairly familiar one of coming to name an object and agreeing on the name we have given it — more complicated, but perhaps not too interestingly so, than what we find in the example of the metre-stick. In the case of our more complex terms such as ‘personhood’, ‘goodness’, ‘love’ and so on, the story will likely boil down to social history. Jealousy, to give a (overly) simple example, develops grammatically as our culture develops institutionally. We develop institutions based on the pledge of fidelity (such as marriage); and once we have examples of people betraying these institutions, we can use the behavior of the wounded (Dido of Virgil’s Aeneas, for example) as a standard by which we can, so to say, represent the world jealously. The point is, we are able to represent and refer to the world in speech because we use world as a standard of representation and reference when speaking about the sundry objects we experience. And so when we want to get clear on the reality of the objects we talk about — what we are saying about the way the world is when we say that this is that sort of thing — we do not try to take a stab at the nature of the thing as it ‘really’ is apart from how we say that it is. We come to our understanding of the reality of the things we talk about by reflecting on the story of how these bits of the world have been brought into and given shape by our way of life.

Thus we are not to think that the act of using sentences to refer to or represent the world carries the entire burden of our connection to the world. Indeed, in a very significant sense we apply world to world by way of language in representation, and we
should hear this claim as running very much contrary to the notion that representation explains the basic, initial if you like, union of language and reality. We use the world to fix the use of the words in our language, and thus we make the leap to representational and referential speech because language already aligns us with reality — because we already stand on world. Language absorbs world, building it into the fabric of its grammar. And we account for this not by claiming that language can perform some mysterious metaphysical act. We rather show that the story of the source of our standards for talking about the world is a tale of cultural activity, a matter of how a living practice develops standards of representation by building words upon world.

These aspects of our natural world and human history that we draw into language become transformed into what Wittgenstein calls criteria. If we said earlier that grammar expresses essence, criteria now become the precise vehicles for the specification of essence, of "what sort of object anything is." Our descriptions of reality are made possible by the fact that these criteria are built into our language: they are what allow us to identify a thing as being this thing, and so what allow us to "word the world together." They do not 'make it the case' that the world is really as we say it is or 'establish the

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22 A full account of this topic would discuss the relation between criteria and samples. One will have to forgive my running roughshod over this distinction and concentrating solely on the concept of criteria — I do so because it is only the notion of criteria that will interest us when we turn to the positive arguments for humanism later in this chapter.

23 Cavell (1979) p. 316. My understanding of the role of criteria in Wittgenstein's philosophy is admittedly seen through the lenses of Cavell's unique interpretation of Wittgenstein. It is arguable — likely undeniable — that philosophers who write on Wittgenstein give much more prominence to the notion of criteria than Wittgenstein himself ever did in his own writings. In the remaining chapters of this dissertation I will be guilty of the same sin (if it in fact is a sin). Since my interest lies in defending humanism and not a point of Wittgenstein scholarship, I am quite content to accept this.
truth’ of what language calls reality. They provide the conditions of any sort of talk, talk of truth included. Criteria specify the expression of reality in grammar, determining the conceptual vocabularies we have in virtue of having a language. In this respect the connection they work to secure is direct: there is no wedge to be placed between a criterion and the reality it expresses, for a specification of the criteria of $\phi$ just is a specification of $\phi$ (we might recall here Wittgenstein’s oft-quoted: “When we say, and mean, such-and-such, we — and our meaning — do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean this-is-so.” *PI* §95). Criteria provide the boundaries of meaning and sense, of what we can intelligibly claim to be the case. They are the specifications of the rules of the game, as it were, the standards that account for our alignment with others in communication. The significance of these claims will become clearer as we proceed, but the immediate point is that criteria function not as a sort of replacement to representation and correspondence talk. They are the condition, the bedrock, of the possibility of any talk at all.

To return to the fear that I mentioned at the beginning of this section, we can now see that when we give an account of our language, we are expressly not recording facts about a lifeless structure of symbols and sounds that we just happen to find ourselves with. It is in a profound respect to give account of ourselves, of the way in which a sign is given life by what Wittgenstein calls a form of life, a phrase that brings home the idea that language is not a mere arbitrary symbol system but an expression of the our-worldly. Language penetrates so thoroughly into our understanding of the our-worldly that it becomes utterly mysterious to conceive what it might mean to say that language (as we might put it) is
mere convention with no nature. It is the failure to see this that accounts for the fact that we think, as the sceptic suggests we should, that a creature of convention such as language might be dispossessed of reality — in some way at odds with or immanently divided from the natural — just because it is convention. As Cavell puts it, the gap between language and the world

is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the apprehension and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human "convention". This implies that the sense of the gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a "stranger" to, "alienated" from) those shared forms of life.\textsuperscript{24}

The things we call language and reality are made ‘strangers’ to one another when we regard them in abstraction, in a vacuum of thought that ignores the common thread by which they are woven together: our form of life. There is something deeply problematic in approaching the issue by thinking that reality and language are two variables, thoroughly detachable from one another in our reflections on each, of which it is the philosopher’s task to query whether and how they might have anything more than a capricious relation to one another. The things we understand as word and world blur into one another in our understanding of the our-worldly. They are intertwined so intimately at the level of our form of life that when we conceive of their most basic alliance our understanding of one is inseparable from the other. Our form of life is basic, the bedrock upon which we build our various inquiries into who we are, what our words mean, and the way our world is:

\textsuperscript{24} Cavell (1979), 109.
‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and false?’ It is what humans beings say that is true or false and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in a forms of life. (*PI §242*)

As the above quotation makes clear, Wittgenstein is not suggesting some totalizing, monolithic standard of meaningful speech when he grounds language in a form of life, and it is important to notice this lest we read his theory as proposing the patently absurd idea that we all must always say the same things about the world when we apply our language to it (as though an argument or debate always implies that one of the parties does not understand language or has not been fully initiated into our form of life). We differ as a matter of course in how we describe various corners of our world. What Wittgenstein is unwilling to do is to let these variations in what we say lead to a crude form of relativism that threatens to undermine the idea of a basic shared alignment.25 We do as a fact of daily experience encounter people who speak about the world in ways we would not (such as when I meet an animist or an AI theorist). But I do not imagine different *life forms* when I encounter differences in how aspects of the world are described; I do not thereby parse people apart into those who share my world and those who seem to be aligned with another one altogether just on account of these variances. I may doubt someone who offers a refashioning of the flat-earth theory; I do not doubt that we stand on the same soil when we debate this.26

25 As Cavell likes to put it, the emphasis is not on ‘*forms of life*’ but ‘*forms of life*’ drawing attention to what is shared. See Cavell (1989), 329.

26 We might recall William James’ argument against idealist interpretations of his own philosophy. Imagine a bag of beans tossed on to a table. There is a multitude of ways we can describe the beans. If we disagree on how to sort or describe them we will quickly learn that nothing determines whether they should be sorted or described this way or that. But to argue that this indeterminacy points up that bean-talk is wholly
disagreement and variations in belief is much like the one I have when I speak to a child or a genius: I see a deficit or depth of perception in confronting the same world. If an analogy is needed, our attitude towards the alignment expressed by our language is like that we have towards the ground we walk on rather than a hypothesis we may debate.\textsuperscript{27} The attempt to undermine language in the way certain arguments for linguistic scepticism do — generalizing from local disagreements and errors to the possibility that from beginning to end language might be untied to any determinate orientation towards reality — fails to take into consideration that the very pointing up of errors and differences in vocabularies and commitments already betrays a basic common alignment, a shared stage upon which we rehearse our differences.\textsuperscript{28} It is for this reason that in On Certainty (OC henceforth) Wittgenstein says:

In order to make a mistake, one must already judge in conformity with mankind. (OC §156)

\textsuperscript{27} I steal here from Lars Herzberg's phrase "faith in the ground we walk on." See Herzberge (1976), 150.

\textsuperscript{28} Much more can be said against the idea that local errors (say when we find that a scientific or moral picture is wrong) can be generalized into the "mightn't we be wrong about everything else" hypothesis we find in garden-variety sceptical arguments. This debate is much too involved for our purposes here, and so I leave it aside. But a suggestion for an argument that would be consistent with what I have said above might be the following: we cannot generalize from a failure of a local vocabulary (say of a failed but once entrenched scientific theory) to a claim about the possibility of error in all other areas. In attempting this, the sceptic fails to see, as Michael Williams puts it, "the context-sensitivity of both sceptical doubts and everyday certainties" by mistakenly assuming that one can investigate (or generalize about) "our epistemic situation," as though it is a sort of monolithic, unified field of inquiry. See Michael Williams (1996), 35.
Le me conclude my discussion of Wittgenstein by examining an argument he gives in *On Certainty* against the possibility of tearing apart language and world. The argument shows precisely why we must embrace an idea that the previous positions we have gone over have all touched on in various ways: we must accept that we cannot transcend language yet refuse the linguistic sceptic’s temptation to think of language as therefore silent about the way the world ‘really’ is. Like many of Wittgenstein’s most interesting arguments, it expresses a profound point with the simplest of insights. It begins by drawing us precariously near anti-realism, and the beauty of the argument lies in how it allows us to keep our balance just before falling over. Consider the following quotes:

I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish the true and the false. (*OC* §94)

And:

If the true is what is grounded, the ground is not true, nor yet false. (*OC* §205)

At first glance this may strike us as nothing more than a revised argument for idealism, for the claim being made is that the ground language offers us for speaking about the world — our linguistic criteria — cannot be said to be true. But notice also that the ground cannot be said to be false. And this is curious. I cannot claim truth or

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29 I read *On Certainty* as often replacing the notions of grammar and criteria found in the *Philosophical Investigations* (and the writings leading up to it, such as *Philosophical Grammar*) with talk about "ground" and "background".
falsity for it, so what can I say about it at all?\(^{30}\) Doesn’t this imply that there is just *nothing* to say, that — as Rorty prods for much the same reasons — there is no longer any reason to talk about a connection between language and reality?\(^{31}\) Indeed, is it not right to say what the linguistic sceptic has always said, that we cannot *know* that language offers us an alignment with the way the world is?

The answer to this question, like most honest answers, is yes and no. I certainly cannot *know* that the criteria of language *truly* reveal how the world (‘transcendently’, as it were) is, for there is no truth to be mentioned here that would support my claim that I know it. Criteria express the conditions of truth and falsity, and thus they are not open to assessment for truth and falsity themselves. This much Wittgenstein makes clear and this much the linguistic sceptic has right (and this is why she is so often hard to silence: we cannot just say that she is wrong, that her sceptical hypothesis is just *false*). When she says “you do not *know* that language gets the world right” I *must* answer “no, I do not *know* that”. But notice that, unlike the linguistic sceptic, my saying that I do not know this is not a concession that a truth-value is missing where there should be one. It is not a concession that there is some adjudicating fact that is unfortunately unavailable to us. The sceptic takes our inability to claim knowledge here to qualify what sort of *belief* we can have about the worldly reach of criteria. But what Wittgenstein is saying is that *there is no*

\(^{30}\) It is for this reason that Wittgenstein has mistakenly been taken to be the father of modern anti-realism. This tradition is long and fairly illustrious. G.E.M Anscombe, Bernard Williams, Michael Dummet and Saul Kripke have, in various ways, contributed to this view.

\(^{31}\) See Rorty (1979).
belief at this level. Whereas the sceptic takes this mandatory “I do not know” to show up an epistemic defeat, a failure of knowledge, Wittgenstein responds by saying there is no defeat because the battle is not epistemic: it is not a failure of knowledge because knowledge-claims do not apply here. This is an unusual first step in an argument that promises to unite language and reality, but if we follow the idea it will lead us somewhere very interesting.

The specific problem with the sceptic is that she demands grounds for the very grounds we have for speaking. Now the grounds the sceptic argues we lack are indeed absent: there is nothing that could voice an assurance that language truly expresses reality as it is. But this is not because linguistic criteria are groundless, if we mean by this that we have somehow managed to see that they are free-floating, that where we thought there was a kind of metaphysical anchor we now see that there is nothing at all. What is wrong with saying “groundless” is precisely that we are speaking about the grounds of language — to use “groundless” here is to fail to understand what we are talking about: bedrock, beneath which we cannot go. To ask to have our linguistic criteria, our language, vouched for is to ask for grounds for our criteria. But this, of course, amounts to asking for criteria with which we can evaluate our criteria to be true, grounds for our very grounds of meaningful speech. And by this logic we then must ask for an evaluation of these newly acquired criteria and grounds — what grounds them? — and so on until we find ourselves with a very nasty infinite regress. The sceptic’s question ceases to be meaningful at this point, requiring as it does that she speak without the support of criteria in fashioning her repudiation of our criteria. —Whose criteria does she use to carry out this repudiation, to
state her sceptical hypothesis? They cannot be the criteria of our language, for these are what she is questioning. She asks, "how do I know that things are as we say they are, that this is really a chair, the sun, a human, etc.?" What else should I say? What else could we coherently call these things? And on what do I stand when I picture an alternative?

The sceptic’s question does not place a wedge between what we say and the way the world is so much as it dissolves the possibility of meaningful speech altogether. In this respect the sceptical impulse — to ask whether our criteria are as such right or wrong — is perhaps not unlike a certain Scholastic penchant for asking how much time elapsed before God created time. Language refuses to be an ally here. In trying to repudiate the alignment with reality we find in criteria the sceptic speaks from the dark, asking an impossible question rather than one that tells us something about the nature of our criterial relation to reality. The sceptic does not reveal a gap between language and reality in this sense, then: the vocabulary she employs in stating her scepticism is drained of its force, empty. She attempts to take up a cognitive perspective towards the possibilities of having any sort of cognitive perspective at all, and in so doing she loses language, she is in effect silenced by her own words. Stephan Mulhall offers a concise expression of this idea:

The truth is that, since criteria are the condition for the possibility of knowledge-claims, they cannot themselves be items of knowledge...So, unhesitating belief in the truth of criteria and sceptical doubts are equally misplaced...it can never be right to combat scepticism either by claiming that criteria confer certainty, or by denying the possibility of their repudiation.
What must rather be shown is the true cost of that repudiation, to refuse them is to deprive oneself of the power of coherent speech.\textsuperscript{32}

Wittgenstein's response comes at a price, but one which brings reality down to earth and thus to the our-worldly in the process. We lose the idea that we can have our linguistic alignment with reality vouched for, shown to be true all the way down as it were. We might call this the metaphysical craving, and its satisfaction is denied us. The sceptic, for her part, does make us realize this. Since we cannot respond to her "how do you know" with "of course we know,"\textsuperscript{33} she makes us realize the fact that we cannot step outside of our form of life and speak meaningfully about its linguistic success. The evaluation of language is always an internal affair, a process carried out from within language. But what we have also seen is that from within our language we can speak perfectly well of our alignment. Wittgenstein wants to say that if we lose the ability to claim truth for our alignment, to speak of the validity of the presentation of the world in our language, we also lose the ability to doubt it in the way the sceptic envisions. And so we can no longer speak of the possibility of a categorical rift between the claims language makes and the way the world is. We can no longer imagine language, as such, as divorced from reality.

This is the reward for what might appear to be a steep sacrifice. What forces us to accept that language aligns us with reality is not a right we win from any metaphysical or

\textsuperscript{32} Mulhall, (1996), 6-7.

\textsuperscript{33} We might recall Wittgenstein's critique of Moore's defense of common sense realism: "Moore's mistake lies in this — countering the assertion that one cannot know that by saying, "I do know that." OC § 521.
ontological insight: "What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say — *forms of life*" (*PI* §226), and we cannot step outside of the conditions of meaningful speech — involvement in the our-worldly — to try to see what grounds it. It is an entitlement that is bestowed not by a cognitive insight but by the commitments revealed in the very act of speaking meaningfully. This picture brings the idea of the word-world relation down to earth by making their alignment a fact of life, declared by the simple but profoundly revealing point that we succeed in making ourselves understood to one another. The union of word and world is grounded and given expression in the fabric of our living human practices, made visible not through any feat of metaphysical inquiry but by seeing what is already plainly before us: our shared form of life.

What we find is that we really have lost nothing. Indeed, we can speak just as the realist does: we *are* realists, only realists without the metaphysical craving — we are our-worldly realists, if you like. Cavell brings to light precisely how much we can still claim:

The phenomena which constitute the criteria of something’s being so are fully *in the nature of things* — they are a part of those very general facts of nature or of human life itself against the background of which our concepts mean anything at all, and in particular, mean something *about* what we call “the nature of things” or “the world.”

How, precisely, did we gain the right to speak of criteria as offering us nature so directly? We cannot speak of truth-claims here. We cannot speak of a match between criteria and the way the world is, nor of adequate representation. *But this is because here there is no*
gap that can be meaningfully mentioned. We cannot turn language on itself in the attempt to tear word from world, criteria from the basic alignment with reality they express. It is not a hypothesis that our criteria match the facts. It is not a deduction or inference that allows us to make this claim. It is a grammatical ‘truth’, a claim forced on us by the very words we use to communicate with one another. We can say that an insight into criteria is an insight into reality not because criteria show us how word truly matches up with world, but because there is no, we might say, dividing distinction to be made between the two at this level, no wedge to be placed between one and the other. I do not see a divide with a proper bridge in place when I examine how my words align me with reality. I see only this: A form of life, a language that reveals a certain alignment with reality, but nevertheless an alignment, one which underlies, indeed is expressed in, the act of speaking meaningfully. We can never get outside of language and attest for its success, though we can now see that besides being incomprehensible this is also unnecessary. Again, the point is not to feel chafed by our skin but to realize that we lose much less than we thought by being in it.

2.3 World in Literature

The humanist’s sceptic, like the linguistic sceptic, plays on our fear that a view into language, cut off from any actual thing we might use language to talk about, is a view of words divorced from reality. And thus we felt that we embraced a paradox if we still held on to our humanist intuition. We felt that literary language — offering as it does nothing
but words layered upon words without a worldly object as the target of these words — is exactly that use of language that brings into view what we called the linguistic divide, that exposes this supposed gap between word and world. The sceptic gave us the idea of a window through which language must look when it aspires to be informative of reality. And literature, on the sceptic’s picture, looked trapped, incapable of offering a glimpse of what is on the other side, for it by definition does not use the representational tools that the sceptic argued alone account for the wedding of word and world, for building a proper picture of reality.

What we have done is to replace this picture with one in which language is seen as expressing world within itself, not as connecting to an independent reality by mapping it but by building it into its ‘grammar’, its criteria, in such a way that there is no longer any sense to the idea of language as such as empty of world. The alternative picture of language I developed allows us to see the connection between language and reality as prior (in understanding, as Aristotle might say) to the level at which the sceptic gives his arguments. And there is, as far as I can see, no longer sense to the idea of isolationism, no more force behind the sceptic’s argument that we are left with mere language if we lose the sceptic’s tools. The wedding of word and world does not take place at the level he envisioned, thus nothing is divided when we lose his tools. If we stand only on language, as literature does, we stand on quite enough to claim that we have a point of contact with the our-worldly. If there is not the divide that requires bridging with his tools, neither is there the implication that without them a use of language is empty of the our-worldly. Isolationism does not follow from the sceptic’s recital, and so the humanist is not beset with paradox when he claims that literature, in presenting to view words unconcerned
with the stirrings of extra-textual reality, presents us with something sufficient to bring our world before us.

We have come a long way, far enough from the sceptic to see that there is nothing muddled, nothing incoherent, in the humanist intuition. But we have also, as we may have noticed, found a way to structure this intuition, a vocabulary with which we can explain what sort of view of the our worldly literature can present to us. I will conclude by shedding some light on this, offering an example that we will shape into a respectable insight in the following chapters. While what I say here will call out for further elaboration, I want to make clear what possibilities have now opened up for the humanist, to give his intuition a foundation we can build upon as we proceed.

What I will call the ‘basic humanist claim’, the ground-level statement we are now entitled to make about the presence of the our-worldly in literature, can be characterized as follows. We want to say that for some aspect of a work of literature that arouses our worldly interest, we can claim of it that ‘this is $\phi$’ in such a way that there is no wedge to be placed between the fiction’s presentation of $\phi$ and what $\phi$ is. We take the demonstrative as functioning to pick out not a represented worldly object (the sceptic has taken this from us) nor a pure creature of fiction (which the sceptic says it must pick out) but $\phi$ just as it is. For those aspects of cultural life that fuel the furnaces of literary creation, we want to say that they are seen, just as they are, in the text: that this is jealousy, this is anger, this is suffering, and so on. And we want to be able to say this in such a way that the force of the demonstrative is one of identifying directly within the text something more properly
called ‘life’ than the merely lifelike, *veritas* rather than verisimilitude, world rather than a fictional mimesis of it.

Let us give some structure to this discussion with a concrete critical example. In re-reading *Othello* I see that I have missed something, one of those instances of finding a new layer of complexity in a work read a number of times before. Although I very well know that Othello is the subject of Iago’s angry discussion with Roderigo in the first act, I notice for the first time that never once is Othello mentioned by name. The first time Othello is explicitly referred to it is not by his proper name but by his ethnicity: he is “The Moor” (I.i.40). Iago is Othello’s *ancient* and confidant — they know each other intimately — and if not for his anger we would certainly expect him to call Othello by his proper name, and this I now see is subtly suggestive. A few lines later Roderigo adds color to our picture of this nameless Moor by calling him “thick-lips” (I.i.66); and I begin to see a progression — in that vague way we become attuned to something taking shape when we read a literary work — that culminates in the first important scene of the tragedy. Iago decides to deliver his initial blow by telling Brabantio that his daughter has secretly married Othello. Again, never once is Othello’s named used, and the words Iago uses reveal why:

> Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old Black ram is tupping your white ewe; arise, arise, Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (I.i.87-90)

35 All references are to the Ridley edition (1965).
Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not service God, if the Devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, you think we are ruffians, you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for Germans. (I.i.110-13)

I am one, sir, that come to tell you, your daughter, and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs. (I.i.115).

Iago’s tactic in the above passages is to appeal to the crudest part of Brabantio: his gut-level sense of blood and purity, his racial instinct. Iago offers the image, so well crafted to pierce Brabantio’s fatherly sense, of his daughter with an African animal, being ‘tipped’ by a black ram who will bring not proper grandchildren but cross-breeds into his family line.36 There is neither a marriage nor a man depicted in Iago’s words, just the image of a “white ewe” copulating with a black beast. (That Iago has skillfully chosen this tactic for Brabantio is attested to in the final act of the tragedy. Standing above his smothered niece, Gratiano says of the recently expired Brabantio: “Poor Desdemona, I am glad thy father’s dead; Thy match was mortal to him; and pure grief shore his old thread atwain,” V.ii. 205-6.) One would have to be quite naïve to call Iago’s tactic here

36 Should it be worth mentioning, I am not, in emphasizing the text’s references to Othello’s blackness, asking that we understand the matter as though it is some way of a piece with race and blackness as it is addressed and understood in (for example) 20th century American literature. Iago’s strategy here is to dehumanize Othello by making him an outsider, an ‘other’ as it would be fashionable to say; and Othello’s race is clearly the brush with which Iago paints this picture, regardless of what race and blackness might signify for Iago, Shakespearean audiences, or in the structure of the first act. As far as I am aware, critics of Othello, at least since Coleridge (whose argument against reading Othello as a “veritable Negro” is arguably itself a classic of racist reasoning), are generally agreed in this interpretation. The Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom puts the point well, if not grandiloquently, when he writes of Iago: “the passed-over officer becomes the poet of street brawls, stabblings in the dark, disinformation, and above all else, the uncreation of Othello, the sparagmos of the great captain-general so that he can be returned to the original abyss, the chaos that Iago equates with the Moor’s African origins.” (Bloom, 1998, 438.) See also Ridley (1965) and Zulfiker Ghose (1993) for interesting discussions of this.
something other than racist. What is striking, and certainly brilliant, about the passage is how perfectly it captures racism, how, we might say, essentially racist it is. What we see is the gradual construction of a dehumanized picture of Othello. It begins with a reduction of his identity to what divides him from everyone else, his ethnicity; and from here on all of the attendant expressions of racism are brought to life: the notion of the perversion of mixed blood, the idea that an act of love with a racial outsider amounts to sex with a sub-human, an animal, and so is a violation of one’s body and family. This is racism, we want to say. Let us see how we can make sense of it, whether we can explain it in such a way that we can claim to have discovered a foundation for humanism.

Now by “this is racism” I do not mean to pick out some mimetic function of the work, say the fact that Iago is acting as a real racist would. Trivially he is, or else we would not be inclined to call his tactic racist. But I mean something deeper than that the racism we see there looks like or imitates real racism. I want to say that it is racism. Nor — to dismiss another possibility — is my claim to be taken as saying that the text refers to or represents some extra-textual state of affairs. How would we explain this? Do we say that it represents a universal of some sort, that by “this is racism” I mean to say that the text is a representation of some strange metaphysical entity, perhaps Racism As Such?}

37 Tellingly, Iago uses much the same racial strategy later in the tragedy against Othello himself. In giving him reasons to doubt Desdemona’s faithfulness, he argues that it is in her nature to betray him: “Ay, there’s the point: as, to be bold with you, /Not to affect many proposed matches /Of her own clime, complexion, and degree /Whereto we see in all things nature tends- /Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank /Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural/ But pardon me: I do not in position/Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear/ Her will, recoiling to her better judgement /May fall to match you with her country forms /And happily repent.” (III.iii.231-241).
This is one of the faults of many older forms of humanism — their (bloated) metaphysicalism — that we hope to correct. It is an unwanted idea, and in any case the sceptic, for his part, has shown us that the only legitimate application of notions of reference and representation to a work of literature is that of fictional reference and representation, to record how a novel describes an imaginatively created world. Lastly, I am not saying with my “this is racism” that the text (or the scenes we have looked over) amounts to the claim that racism is thus and such sort of thing, as though my ‘this’ functions to pick out a proposition of some sort that is implied by the text. The text, as far as I can see, does not state either directly or indirectly a truth-valued proposition about the nature of racism. Again, the sceptic is right here: what the text describes, what it makes assertions and claims about, is the (fictional) world of its narrative line.

The sceptic is right that my “this is racism” says something only about the words I see in the text, its language and not some further extra-textual property it represents. But what he failed to see is that this does not imply an absence of reality. He failed to see that the language we find in a text is sufficient to speak of a substantive connection to reality. Whereas he thought isolationism followed from the admission that there is no extra-textual reference and representation (and the obvious cognate semantic tools), whereas he thought this claim implied a divide between the words of the text and the our-worldly, we now have a way of asserting a firm connection. For we have found a way of speaking of reality as it is expressed in language. And so we have a way of claiming that a textual form that holds up for inspection only the words that make up our form of life, will be capable of bringing the our-worldly into view by showing us this reality that lies within
our language. The sceptic was not wrong, but blind to another possibility, one which we now have at our disposal.

To return to our example and see what we can now say, when I claim of *Othello* that "this is racism", my 'this' has, I suggest, the force of registering that the text speaks on what we would call the *criterial* level of what racism is, bringing before us language as it is involved with reality at 'bedrock' rather than in acts of reference and representation. With slight but instructive bombast, we can say that when Iago sets to turning Brabantio against Othello, he becomes our word for racism — so complete is Iago's expression of racism that we see exposed in his words the criteria for this fixture of our form of life. This is not to attribute any extraordinary powers to Shakespeare, except that power over words we know that writers of his endowment possess. To account for this we need only to point out what we have already seen, that Shakespeare's Iago, a creature of fiction though he may be, is nonetheless a fiction that draws together at such a level of clarity and order all that goes into what we call "racism" that there is no wedge to be placed between the text's expression of it and what this fixture of our culture most basically *is*. The 'is' here, of course, is not the existential 'is' of the actual or the empirical. It is the 'is' of what Wittgenstein calls 'essence', of our language's specification of what the world *is* for us. Just as 'grammar expresses essence,' we are claiming that the language of *Othello* expresses racism. Just as criteria 'tell us what kind of object anything is,' we are claiming that literary language in general can be a specific mouthpiece of 'what kind of object anything is.' My "this is racism", then, does not record either the referential or representational successes of *Othello*, for there is no success to be spoken of here. It records the success of its expression of racism, not as a simple expression of *Sinn*, but of
the fundamental connection to our world that underlies what the sceptic took to be just a ‘mere’ word.

In his book *Inconvenient Fictions*, Bernard Harrison puts the distinction as I want to recommend it:

> It is time to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. Literary language, the language of narrative fiction and poetry, is, root and branch, constitutive language. As such it is non-referential and it makes no statements...It is a language occupied solely with itself, *in a sense*. The mistake promoted by the Positivistic vision of language is to suppose that this sense can be absolute. Language is everywhere hopelessly infected with the extra-linguistic: the relationship between its signs runs ineluctably by way of the world. So there is, just as the critical humanist has always maintained, a strong connection between language and Reality; only it does not run by way of reference and truth. Rather, it permeates the thickness of the language we speak...³⁸

Our humanist argues that he has provided a picture of language that permits us a similar claim, that literature can bring before us reality as it lies within our language rather than reality as we come into contact with it in referential and representational speech. For if literature represents nothing real, we now can see it as bringing into view our *standards* of representation, our linguistic criteria “for what the world ‘is’, without themselves being removed from that world.”³⁹ And when we say of what we find in a work of literature that *this* is racism, *this* is jealousy, *this* is suffering, we are testifying to the fact that literature has the power to open up language and expose this reality as it is woven into the fabric of our language — that it has the power to beat, if you will, the world out of our words. In

this respect, when we find ourselves in the presence of the literary we come into contact with something much like what Harrison calls ‘constitutive’ language, for we see language showing us its structure, confessing the reality upon which it is built. We thus find that we do not need to look outside of the text to explain the humanist connection, for there is nothing outside of the text that matters to the humanist. We do not need to attempt to unite the literary with anything hors-texte. We just look deeper into what is already within it: our language. And the humanist claims that if we look deeply enough, we find that there with it is our world as well, not as a represented object but world as it “permeates the thickness” of the language both we and the literary work of art speak.

As we said in the last chapter, the idea of humanism is not conceptually troublesome, as though the thesis of humanism is as intuitively problematic and unlikely as (say) the thesis of the unreality of the physical world is. As we saw in 1.1, humanism has tremendous initial intuitiveness. What made humanism appear so dubious to us was a particular picture of language, namely the picture exploited by the sceptic. Now if we provide an alternative to this picture, as our humanist has done, this will not help us to show something called the ‘truth’ of humanism, if by this we are asking for a proof or some other form of ‘showing’ that leads us by the tracks of entailment to the claim that literature does what I have claimed it can do. Nor should we expect this from a field that lies at the very speculative intersection of philosophy of language and literary theory. But this is hardly a sad thing to say. What the discovery of this alternative picture of language will allow us to do is to inject the humanist intuition with something just as satisfying: reasonableness, indeed just as much reasonableness as we once thought the sceptic’s position derived from the picture of language on which he relied.
To be sure, the humanist claims that there are only two ideas we need to accept to see the reasonableness of his position. One is the idea that the basic alliance between word and world lies within language, and for this claim I have given what I hope are persuasive arguments. The other idea is perhaps really more of a reminder of something we already believe. It is the idea (quite common if I can read my culture aright) that in literature we find the highest expression of a culture’s power over its words, that literature is the record of a culture’s grasp of the vitality of its own language, of its linguistic self-awareness — call it the power of introspection played out on a grand cultural scale. If we accept these two ideas, the philosophical one I have argued for and the cultural one I think will sound a familiar note, it is not such a leap to connect them. It is not such a leap to see the power of literature as resting at least in part in its ability to expose what is already within our language, this basic union of word and world. If the arguments I have given in this chapter are adequate, I do not think that this step is a particularly difficult one to take.

There is much more to be said about humanism, and indeed the position I have developed here is only an introduction to a theory we will develop in the following chapters. In particular, we need an account of the cognitive status of the connection the humanist has secured with reality, as well as a much more precise examination of what it means to take the humanist stance towards a textual form that exhales fictions from beginning to end. These are the topics to which I turn in the remaining two chapters. What I have done in this chapter is to wrestle humanism away from the grip of the sceptic’s view of language. And what I hope we can now see is that far from being incoherent it is possible to offer the humanist intuition a sturdy linguistic foundation. If we need a title for the theoretical
shape we are giving to the humanist intuition, we might call it this: *linguistic humanism*. To give life to the humanist intuition we need nothing — no suspicious metaphysical object, no mysterious act of squeezing an extra-textual representation out of a textual form that trades in fictional reference, no comparison between the world of the text and our world — except the language we find in a literary text.
THE LAST CHAPTER offered a foundation to humanism by undoing the sceptic’s isolationist view of literary language. In taking from the sceptic his isolationist conclusion, in effect forcing him to default on his own scepticism — without isolationism there is no vital sceptical stance — we saw that nothing in the idea of the literary implies the incoherence of humanism, nothing, that is, except a misguided picture of the nature of language. We saw that nothing supports the sceptic’s picture of a divide between word and world which literature exposes and which the humanist cannot bridge. What the humanist has been looking for, and what he has found, is a way of speaking about the presence of the our-worldly in literature that is compatible with literature’s explicit lack of worldly representation and reference.

The humanist’s strategy, we might put it, was to bring that which was right before our very eyes right before our very eyes. What we thought cut us off from reality — literature’s preoccupation with language rather than the objects of reference — is precisely what we now see as supporting our humanist intuition. We have what we always
knew is all that we have in literature: language without linguistically represented reality, words without worldly targets. Literature, again as we likely always knew, is an exclusively linguistic affair, a sort of convening of the words of our language with no pretense to using these words to mirror the objects (perhaps crudely put) with which they are associated in their standard descriptive usage. But the mistake, an understandable but dangerous one, is to hear this as implying a loss of reality. As we saw in the last chapter, the error lies in thinking that there is no alternative, that we either have worldly reference or linguistic self-reference, a depiction of the actual world or words that speak of nothing but themselves. What we saw is that there is a significant sense in which we can speak of reality as it is expressed within language, as it underlies the words that run through our form of life. And literature, I argued, is capable of bringing this into view. We give linguistic plausibility to the idea that we see the reality of some fixture of the our-worldly in literature by connecting literary language not to a realm of represented objects but to something already incontestably present in the language of the text: the everyday grammar of our natural language. We see literature as exposing reality not by way of extra-textual reference. Literature reveals world by bringing to light our criterial relation with reality, our standards of representation. And in so doing literature is able to offer us a vision of, to borrow again Harrison's elegant phrase, reality "as it permeates the thickness of the language we speak." In this way we find that we can reconcile the idea that literature speaks in independence from the stirrings of extra-textual reality with the seemingly incompatible idea that the language of a literary text puts us in intimate contact with the our-worldly.
While we have won the right to speak like a humanist, we nevertheless have not yet learned precisely how to speak like a humanist. The way in which we made sense of the basic humanist claim may bring down the walls the sceptic placed around the literary text, but as a statement about the our-worldly it is still in one very important respect inarticulate. We might express the problem in the following way. We have fought for a connection stronger than humanism’s traditional use of the notion of mimetic resemblance (so much is implied by the idea that we see world rather than a representational duplication of it in literature). We have a connection stronger than verisimilitude. But we do not yet have veritas, an understanding of the intellectual value of the presentation of the our-worldly in literature. We have a way of speaking about the possibility of seeing reality in literature, but the humanist needs this seeing to be significant, not only a vision of the our-worldly but an illumination of it. In short, we need an account of the cognitive value of the presentation of reality literature offers.

Whatever “cognitive” may mean in its various technical uses, as I will use the term here (and as it is generally used in the literature on aesthetics) it has the sense of asking whether literature can be seen as in some significant respect informative of extra-textual reality. It asks whether literature, to put it plainly, can declare to the reader something about the way his world is, whether this presentation of world the humanist has shown

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1 A notion perhaps most notably used in Aristotelian varieties of humanism. We see the roots of ‘mimetic’ humanism in the famous line of the Poetics at 51b27: “a ‘writer’ (poieses) must be a composer of plots rather than verse, insofar as he is writer according to representation (mimesis), and represents actions.” The humanistic force of this claim is found a few lines latter in the Poetics (51a38-40) when Aristotle argues that there is a ‘universal’ element in mimesis, though there is tremendous variation in opinion as to
literature capable of can in any way be described as a form of cognitive presentation. Without this further step, without revealing our humanist claim to have substantial cognitive force, we open ourselves up to the charge that our position is better described as just anti-anti-humanism\(^2\) rather than a genuine humanistic theory: an argument that silences one who claims that literature has nothing to do with reality, but not a claim to the effect that literature actually has anything interesting to say about this world we inhabit. Without this further claim we make ourselves vulnerable to the charge that the vision we have fought to secure is trivial: we may see world in literature, but if literature cannot offer a cognitively interesting engagement with reality, it is hard to see why it is worth learning how to speak like a humanist, why one should care about literature’s ability to present reality to us.

We have come very far. We have a model for describing how we can see our world directly in the literary use of language. This itself is very important, for it offers humanism a secure foundation. But it is just that, a foundation; and in attempting to build upon it we find ourselves facing a new challenge. The question of the cognitive value of literature is one of the central questions of the philosophy of literature, and so we now enter a discussion that brings with it its own set of problems. There is a very simple and

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\(^2\) A charge Stanley Bates (1998) brings against Lamarque and Olsen’s so-called “no-truth” theory of humanism. Briefly put, Bates argues, correctly in my opinion, that while Lamarque and Olsen rightly emphasize the centrality of (culturally interesting) thematic concepts in literature, by giving up on the idea that there is any significant cognitive content in the vision of reality found in literature — and so a substantive theory of how we might learn from literature — these authors drain their theory of humanism of all philosophical and literary-critical vitality. See Rowe (1996) and Novitz (1997) for similar criticisms.
well-known way of formulating the problem as it threatens us. It is a problem that is most notoriously associated with mimetic theories of art — as Plato saw and duly scorched the idea that art is cognitively valuable — and is captured well by Danto:

[Socrates] spoke of art as a mirror held up to nature...Socrates saw mirrors as but reflecting what we can already see; so art, insofar as mirror-like, yields idle accurate duplications of the appearances of things, and is of no cognitive benefit whatsoever.  

Now the reason mimetic theories make art cognitively trivial is not specific to the fact that it casts art as “mirror-like”. It is because it invites a much more general difficulty. Art, on the mimetic model, turns out to be cognitively trivial because it can do nothing more than bring before us visions of a world with which we are already very much acquainted. It may hold up to view significant corners of our world, but it adds nothing to our understanding of them. We might call it the problem of cognitive familiarity, and the sceptic claims that he can show us that it infects the theory of linguistic humanism I am proposing.

The sceptic charges that all the humanist is entitled to claim — at this point in our discussion at least — is that the strongest cognitive relation we have to literature is that we see in it aspects of the our-worldly knowledge of which we already possess. The sceptic grants that we see — to switch from racism to a much more familiar aspect of the text — jealousy just as it is when we read Othello (and thus for all of the other fixtures of our
form of life that fuel literary creation). But surely, he says, we knew what jealousy is long before reading this literary work. Indeed, he reasonably claims, my very ability to identify Othello as jealous seems to suggest that this literary text presupposes rather than imparts knowledge of this bit of the our-worldly. Otherwise my ability to recognize Othello as jealous would be quite mysterious — at the very least, the sceptic charges, nothing our humanist has hitherto said offers a way of understanding how this could be possible.

Even if the vision of the our-worldly we find in literature is deep, even if it occurs somewhere near the heart of what (say) jealousy or suffering or anger is — a vision of how criteria ‘express essence’ and specify ‘what kind of object anything is’ — the sceptic rightly points out that this only rescues us from the grips of isolationism. It allows us to speak of seeing our world in literature. But it brings us nowhere near a vindication of the idea that literature offers cognitive rewards to the careful reader. Literature, the sceptic says, may hold up reality for appreciation. But, much like an expertly crafted map of a region we already well know, the vision of reality found in literary works is without any genuine cognitive consequence. Literature’s presentation of our world may be brilliant as a feat of aesthetic accomplishment, but it is ultimately a view of quite familiar territory.

At this point the sceptic steps out of his isolationist guise and begins to reinvent himself as the anti-cognitivist sceptic. He accepts that the humanist has provided an alternative to the picture of literary language that leads to isolationism. But he challenges that there is a dubious chance that literature’s presentation of reality can also in any way be informative of reality. Thus the sceptic modifies his position and sets forth this revised sceptical charge: *literature may not be isolated from the world but the connection it offers*
to the world is cognitively trivial. The sceptic, in short, challenges us to show that literature does anything in its presentation of our world that could possibly offer a reason for even treating it as a player in the pursuit of worldly understanding. He challenges us to show that literature can offer any understanding of the world, of whatever sort. If the humanist can show this, he would then open the door to any number of precise species of cognitive rewards: this novel is cognitively valuable because it shows us some previously unknown region of experience, that novel because it confirms our ancient and entrenched beliefs, this novel because it shocks a certain picture of reality, that novel because it secures it, and so on. But we must first meet this much more basic condition, and this is what the sceptic denies that we can do.

What we will see in the next section is that the sceptic has little difficulty taking from the humanist two terms characteristically associated with cognitive value: truth and knowledge. The task will then become one of showing that the humanist’s forfeiture of these notions does not imply that literature is cognitively trivial. There may seem to be an

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4 The problem of cognitive triviality can easily be misread as demanding that literature show us something always new about the world if it is to have cognitive value, and I hope the above makes clear that I am claiming nothing of the sort. If we put all of the emphasis on newness, we invite obvious and serious problems. If considered for only a moment, it becomes impossible to understand how we could show that any piece of writing meets this requirement (I would think that only someone like the astronomer, by pointing us towards his new and previously unavailable telescope, could show us this about what he writes of our world). Consider, to get a sense of this, philosophical texts, which I assume we take to be cognitively valuable. That Plato wrote texts of cognitive value lies not primarily in the fact that he said 'new things'. Surely no one, today or in 4th Century Athens, was ever shocked to hear that the good life is inseparable from the moral life. But in Plato we find this shown, explained, supported — whatever you will — and herein lies his text’s basic claim to cognitive value. This is why the sceptic puts the emphasis on the manner of literature’s presentation of world rather the ‘newness’ of the vision of the world presented. Though I will explore this in detail in the following sections of this chapter, here I hope to prevent a possible misreading the problem. See Noël Carrol (2000), p. 365 for a brief but excellent discussion of this problem.
intolerable tension in this claim — what is a cognition value without truth and knowledge? — but what I will argue is that there is a reasonable and indeed powerful alternative. What I show is that the foundation we secured in the last chapter can be developed in such a way that we can see literature as offering a different sort of intellectual reward, one which while not consisting in the deliverance of worldly truth and knowledge nevertheless allows us to see that literature offers a crucially cognitive engagement with reality.

### 3.1 Texts as Truths?

We are looking for a way to make sense of the idea that literature offers cognitive rewards to the careful reader. The traditional, and most obvious, way of approaching the problem is to ask whether it offers knowledge of extra-textual reality by attempting to lead the reader to truths about the way the world is. But as we will see here, this route is unavailable to us. The history of the philosophy of literature and literary theory provides the sceptic with a well-stocked battery of arguments that show that neither of these terms has any interesting literary application, and here I want to bring the reasons this route is unavailable to us into full view. After the first two chapters of this thesis we should already be familiar enough with the reasons why literature and truth make for frigid bedfellows that the arguments the sceptic gives here against the idea of (as it is often called) ‘knowledge through literature’ will neither come as much of a surprise nor require
immense elaboration. What I will do here is investigate a small but crucial region of the debate our arguments in the previous chapters have not touched on.

Before beginning, we need to get clear on exactly where our humanist finds himself in this debate. We have been exploring the possibility of a strong connection between literature and reality, investigating literature's ability to bring to view, to put it simply, the nature of what Wittgenstein calls "our form of life." But we found that our theory runs into the problem of cognitive familiarity, for our position offers no obvious way of going beyond the notion that, for some worldly φ we find in literature, literature assumes, rather than transmits, knowledge of what φ is. Now, let us agree here, the direct route out of this impasse, one which would allow the humanist to introduce a notion of literature as a conveyer of worldly truth and knowledge, would be to find a way to show that in presenting some fixture of our form of life to view — a sort of presentation of which the humanist can now claim literature to be capable — literature is also able to tell us something about it (perhaps offer a deeper understanding of its character, perhaps inform us of some cloaked corner of its nature — whatever you will). This is to ask something as simple as it is intuitive. It is to query whether Othello might be able to reveal something about what jealousy is in presenting jealousy to view. If Notes From Underground brings suffering before the mind, we could show literature to be capable of offering knowledge of the world if we can find a way to treat the text as also attempting to
inform us of some aspect of the nature of suffering.\(^5\) We are not asking whether literature might trade in justified true belief or lay bare the universal nature of things, should we be tempted to hear particularly technical epistemological or metaphysical issues invited by this question. It will be enough for us to find that literature might try to tell us something — anything — about the nature of those bits of our world it brings to view, and we will require nothing more of it.

However minimal this requirement is, what we will see here is that it is impossible to meet. To show this, let me introduce someone I will call the *truth-seeking* humanist, the humanist who believes that the foundation we have secured for linguistic humanism can be developed in such a way that we can see literature as offering worldly knowledge of the sort just described. We will see that the truth-seeking humanist is misguided, but, like the indirect humanist of chapter one, his mistake tells us something important about literature, and through his error he will reveal precisely where our humanist must turn if he is to find a way to answer the sceptic. A few brief examples will suffice to bring to view what the truth-seeking humanist has in mind.

*Othello*, the truth-seeking humanist brings to our attention, does not merely present jealousy to view, as though it sits in the text as an immobile, granite-like presence. Its presence is rather like that of a fluid that runs through, and in so doing is given shape by, the events of the tragedy. At the moment Othello takes Desdemona’s life we have a vision of jealousy greatly more complex than we find when Iago first sets to stirring this emotion.

\(^5\) As it is often called, ‘propositional’ or ‘discursive’ knowledge, which would be to ask whether literature
in Othello. And the truth-seeking humanist suggests that through its dramatic presentation of jealousy, *Othello* yields what looks to be a genuine candidate for a *claim* about what jealousy is, that (let us agree for the sake of argument) "jealousy is a rage that can destroy what one holds most dear." Likewise, *Medea* presents not just "anger" to view but what looks much like an assertion about 'what anger is'. Through the progression of dramatic events, *Medea* offers a presentation of anger that yields the claim — as the Greek Stoic Chrysippus said we learn from this tragedy — that "anger is a passion that destroys reason and judgement." Perhaps — it is not such a leap — we might even see the entirety of *Anna Karenina* as functioning to lead us to the truth of the sentence with which Tolstoy begins the novel: "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion." Indeed, consider all that Nussbaum argues *Hecuba* can show us:

> I have said that this tragedy *shows* us a case of solid character and shows us that, under certain circumstances, even this cannot escape defilement. It also *has shown* us that even the good character who has not suffered any actual damage or betrayal lives always with the risk of these events...in this sense nothing human is ever *worthy* of trust: there are no guarantees at all, short of revenge or death.

At first glance this way of talking about literary texts strikes us as perfectly legitimate, if only owing to how familiar a note it should sound to anyone who ever read a book review. And notice that Nussbaum’s account of *Hecuba* is teeming with claims to

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6 I hope one will have the courtesy to accept my fairly crude and unsupported thematic summaries for the sake of pursuing the larger philosophical point I am interested in here.

7 See C.J. Gill (1983).

8 Nussbaum (1989), 419.
genuine knowledge-acquisition: \textit{Hecuba} does not just tell us "nothing human is ever worthy of trust," \textit{it shows us this!} This is a strong claim indeed, and of precisely the sort the truth-seeking humanist wants. If literary texts can in fact show us what Nussbaum claims \textit{Hecuba} can show us, a viable theory of literary knowledge cannot be very far away.

Now how might the truth-seeking humanist elicit from these general observations a way of seeing literature as attempting to tell us something about the way the world is? He has an interesting alternative at his disposal, one which suggests a way of getting around all of the arguments for the independence of literature from truth that the sceptic put in our way in the first two chapters. We have known since the sceptic's recital (see 1.2) that the individual sentences of a text do not offer truth by referring, representing or otherwise describing the world. They are beyond truth-valuation in this sense: they are not asserted of the world, thus they cannot be the bridge by which the truth-seeking humanist unites a work of fiction with truths about the way our world is. But the truth-seeking humanist has an unplayed card. He can claim that while the individual sentences of the literary text state no truths, we can take the text \textit{as a whole} as generating a claim about the way the world is. The truth-seeking humanist ignores the referential and representational quality of the text's sentences taken individually — we already know the connection to reality cannot lie here — and instead asks what sort of bridge to the our-worldly we might find if we investigate the literary work taken 'solid'. Nothing about the world is revealed or illuminated when we ask what the individual sentences of the text are about: they are
about fictions or make claims that operate to qualify the fictional world of the text. But if we take the text as a whole, which can bear properties its individual sentences cannot, we have a route to worldly truth left untouched by the sceptical arguments of chapter one that we earlier thought made nonsense of any meaningful connection between literary content and claims about the way the world is. At the very least, we have a way of conceiving how a literary text might generate statements about the nature of the our-worldly when none of its individual sentences speaks of the actual; and this is enough for the truth-seeking humanist to build upon.

The truth-seeking humanist has brought to our attention what is commonly called the thematic level of literature. And this level of a literary work, he claims, offers a way of conceiving how a literary work might shape and structure our understanding of the bits of our world we find in the text such that we can see a literary work as attempting to say something about the nature of these aspects of our world. At what we might call the fictional level of interpretation, the level at which we analyze the content of the individual sentences of the literary text, we find only reports on the contours and happenings of a fictional world (when Othello says of himself that he "loved not wisely, but too well").

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9 This condition is needed to make allowances for the 'reflective' statements we find in literature (say when Iago says of jealousy that it is "the green-eyed monster") which are not in any straightforward way descriptions of proper fictional objects or state of affairs.

10 This would be one way of emphasizing that a literary text is a work, a vehicle of meaning over and above the 'meanings' of the individual sentences of which it is composed. (Think, if an analogy is needed, of a piece of music: Rhapsody in Blue as a work bears properties and values — conveys impressions and emotions, say — its various notes do not.)

11 Leaving aside poststructuralist arguments to the effect that a literary text does not generate a determinate statement at all. Since the position I am describing here will be shown to be untenable in any case, I hope
But at the thematic level, the level at which the praxis of the narrative line forges a distinct conception of (broadly put) life, we find a way of conceiving how a work of literature can generate a statement about the our-worldly (as we might say that we see in Othello’s succumbing to Iago’s falsification of Desdemona a general statement to the effect that ‘jealousy thrives on the weakness of trust’).\(^{12}\)

The truth-seeking humanist argues that he has given us a way to conceive a literary work as a chain of interpretation, of which the individual dramatic events are links and through which a claim is developed, a point pursued, until a structured insight is yielded. And if this is so it appears that the truth-seeking humanist can claim that a literary text can be informative of the aspects of the our-worldly it presents to view. The content of a thematic statement is uncontaminated by fictional reference and thus by that which has blocked the humanist from invoking the notion of truth in our past discussions. And for these reasons it appears that the truth-seeking humanist can challenge that he has made reasonable the idea that literature can advance truths about the world in a structured manner, using the text as a whole as the vehicle of cognitive acquisition. For we have a way of seeing literary texts as fashioning the aspects of the our-worldly they present to view into an insight into their nature. We have a way of seeing how Othello does

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\(^{12}\) It is sometimes argued that what we commonly refer to as a ‘theme’ requires finer distinction, otherwise we have trouble gracefully differentiating the conceptual subject of a novel, say romantic love, and the specific ‘vision’ of this it pursues, say romantic love as a blind passion. Beardsley argues, for example, that we might distinguish theme from thesis, and use the notion of “theme”, roughly put, to specify the conceptual subject and “thesis” the particular conceptualization of it given in the literary work (See
something more than merely present jealousy to view. By working the concept of jealousy through the various events of the tragedy, Othello advances claims about what jealousy is.

There is an initial plausibility to this idea that a literary work, in offering a thematic interpretation of the our-worldly, reveals something about it to us (my positive argument for humanism at the end of the chapter will attempt to salvage what is right in this idea). The sceptic grants that everything the truth-seeking humanist has said sounds right. But he argues that something is amiss, a slight but damaging confusion in the way the truth-seeking humanist understands the terms he is using. Of course the sceptic admits — he would be unreasonable not to — that the thematic level of appreciation builds some sort of bridge between our world and a fictional world. Descriptions of the theme of a literary text pick out interpretations of our most significant practices and experiences, and this no doubt blows our-worldly relevance into the happenings of the fictional world of a literary work. What sounds right in the truth-seeking humanist’s argument is his insistence that the thematic level of literature offers conceptualizations of experience that speak to our sense of the significance of these experiences (it appeals, to state a platitude, to what we care about). But he goes astray in thinking that this presentation of theme in literature can be analyzed in the vocabulary of truth and knowledge-acquisition.

The initial difficulty lies in the work the truth-seeking humanist wants thematic statements to do. If we think carefully for a few moments, it becomes increasingly

difficult to see what would entitle us to treat thematic statements as having ‘assertive’ force, as genuine claims made of the way the world is. A literary text yields a thematic statement insofar as it allows us to ‘read off’ from the dramatic events a conceptual rationale in their role in the novel. When we ask what supports our ascription of a thematic statement to a literary work, we point to a succession of events in the narrative line. And this would appear to put us into contact with plot occurrences rather than points of entry into reality. When we explain the extension of a thematic statement, we are lead not to the world but to a bond of fictional characters and events; and thus we are faced with the fact that a thematic statement ‘says’ nothing more than that thus and such a concept unifies or otherwise finds expression in the dramatic structure of the narrative line of a literary work. Nothing in this, the sceptic charges, entitles us to invoke the notion of truth, to treat literature as proffering knowledge of the way the world is. And the implication of this is that the content of a thematic statement has not epistemological but literary-critical import: it informs us of the conceptual structure of the literary work and not the nature of our world.

In this respect the sceptic asks us to see that the truth-seeking humanist has not offered us a way of understanding how we might squeeze a claim with actual assertive force out of a thematic statement. For there is nothing in our understanding of the logic of the generation of thematic statements that permits us to treat these statements as at all said of extra-textual reality. If we recall the poststructuralist mantra that “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” we see that this notion has a fine application here. For these (putative) statements yielded by a literary text ‘taken whole’ are not genuine statements about extra-textual
reality: they apply only to the structure of the literary text and in no obvious way reach out of it and lay claim to the way the world is. As Lamarque and Olsen argue:

Literary appreciation is concerned with the application of a set of thematic concepts to a particular work. It is not concerned with any further reality to which these concepts might be applied in their other uses. Appreciation, through interpretation, mediates the connection between the work and thematic concepts; but it does no more. Literature offers its own alternative realm of application. It offers an imaginative rather than discursive interpretation of the concepts. And this possibility of applying thematic concepts in literary appreciation makes no direct contribution to philosophical or theological insight, nor is it tied to any such aim. It constitutes its own form of insight, its own kind of interpretation of concepts. The nature of this insight can be analyzed by giving a description of how thematic concepts are attached to literary works. But one can do nothing further to throw light on it.13

The truth-seeking humanist is right to think that by regarding theme as a potential mouthpiece of worldly truth we can get around the problem posed by the sceptic in the first chapter, namely that the individual sentences of a literary text put us into contact only with a fictional world. But what we are beginning to see is that the text itself offers us nothing on which to base a claim to the effect that literature tries to send these thematic statements out into extra-textual reality, and so we find that it offers no way of escaping the sceptic's charge of cognitive triviality.

There is a very simple way of putting this. We might call it the problem of unclaimed truths. Now, need it be mentioned, of course a thematic statement may be true of the world, in the dull sense that any string of words with propositional content bears a truth-value. But its truth is unclaimed by the text, for the text does not assert these

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thematic statements of extra-textual reality. So, while it may be true of both Othello’s world and ours that “jealousy destroys what one holds most dear,” Othello does nothing to attempt to inform us of the worldly truth of this. While the thematic statements we elicit from a text may be true of reality, they are not claimed of reality by the text. They are said of, and function to inform us of, the world of the text, ‘facts’ about its narrative line. So we lose the idea that thematic statements provide a reason for conceiving literature as trying to tell us about the world. The truth-seeking humanist, in this respect, finds himself snared in the sceptic’s old traps: world-constructing texts such as works of literary fiction have only an incidental and contingent relation to worldly truth.14

There is another argument against the possibility of treating literature as a provider of worldly knowledge, one so often stated that there is hardly an original word for the sceptic to add. As Gordon Graham puts it:

[A]n important difference remains between a work of art and a work of inquiry, namely that the latter has a structure of reasoning by which it moves from premise to conclusion, whereas the former does not. History, science, and philosophy are disciplines, organized systems of knowledge, not merely of collections of isolated facts or propositions. Intellectual inquiry does not just confront the mind with facts or hypothesis, but directs it through a progression of thought, and it is this capacity which allows us to call these modes of understanding. In contrast, it seems that the best art can do is to present a point of view. Even writers sympathetic to the idea of truth in art have generally

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14 We see what is unhelpful in Putnam’s account of the cognitive value of literature here. As he describes it: “Consider the experience of reading Don Quixote. One thing that happens to us is that our conceptual and perceptual repertoire becomes enlarged...this enlargement of our stock of predicates and metaphors is cognitive; we now possess ways of describing reality we did not have before.” (Putnam, 1979, 614-615). True, we might say, but peyote hallucinations, jolting nightmares, and one’s vision of humanity during a bout of paranoia all may perform the same feat. We need some way of showing that literature attempts to claim or otherwise support the truth of the conceptualizations (the adequacy of these predicates to reality, to use Putnam’s vocabulary) found there. Otherwise the connection remains incidental and thus invites the anti-cognitivist sceptic’s arguments.
supposed that art merely expresses truth, not that it argues for it. If it does not argue for it, then it cannot be said to properly show it.\textsuperscript{15}

And Lamarque and Olsen are again worth quoting here:

If literary works are construed as having the constitutive aim of advancing truths about human concerns by means of general propositions implicitly or explicitly contained in them, then one should expect to find some kind of supporting argument...however there are no such arguments or debates either in the literary work, or in literary criticism. Literary works cannot therefore be construed as one among other discourses with the intention of stating truths.\textsuperscript{16}

When we find arguments of this sort we should read them as drawing our attention to something more than the tedious point that literature does not establish truths about the world by way of rigid proofs and justifications, which we surely already knew. The interesting problem we see alluded to here is not epistemological but classificatory, a matter of whether we would group literature with those disciplines that we take to attempt to offer knowledge. As Lamarque and Olsen put it, it is a question of whether we find anything in literary works that would entitle us to claim that literature even has the \textit{intention} of stating truths, that it even feigns to present itself as a player in the pursuit of worldly knowledge. It is built into our idea of a knowledge-pursuing discipline — say history, science, or philosophy — that at the very least it offers \textit{reasons} for taking its claims to be true of the world, some argumentative structure, however minimal, that provides an incentive for believing that a text has set its sights on showing us something

\textsuperscript{15} Graham (1995), 196. Graham, it should be noted, is not an anti-cognitivist. Later in this article he argues that literature, while not presenting proper truths, does 'enhance' our understanding of reality by imaginatively illuminating experience. I criticized this sort of view in 1.1.

\textsuperscript{16} Lamarque and Olsen (1996), 368.
about the way the world is. Of course the presence of an argumentative structure does not secure knowledge, as though we think that any text with an argumentative structure, just in virtue of possessing this structure, is therefore a reliable messenger of worldly truth. Indeed it may even be the case that we do not think that our most prized scientific and philosophical works ‘really’ offer truth: we can read Newton without being Newtonians and Plato without giving any credence to Platonism. But, the sceptic reasonably points out, we do at least find some minimal argumentative or reason-giving structure, and this would appear to be what entitles us to classify the text as of the sort that engages in an inquiry about the way the world is, regardless of whether it is successful or insolvent in its attempt.

Without the presence of at least some sort of argumentative structure, it is quite unclear what would invite us to treat a textual form as attempting to inform us about the world, what would even solicit the notion of knowledge-pursuit. Even in the case of the various thought experiments and allegories we find in science and philosophy — which, like literature, describe fictional scenarios — we find the presentation of a premise, a chain of reasoning, something in virtue of which we take the fictions described as attempting to lead us towards a worldly truth. When we examine literature, need we even point this out, we find plot occurrences rather than premises, dramatic events rather than supporting evidence, aesthetic feats rather than philosophical analysis. Now it is no

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17 Leaving aside the question of what might constitute the presence of an argumentative structure. The answer to this question will vary from discipline to discipline, conservative to liberal. The challenge, obviously, is to find anything that resembles one in literature, which casts the net wide enough that it
surprise that we do not find a structure of argumentation in literature. But the obvious question is what then is there in a literary text that would summon us to treat it as attempting to tell us about the way the world is? If literature functioned to pursue worldly knowledge, it would appear that it would have a status not much more respectable than that of texts that trade in groundless declaration and bald pronouncement — likely worse, since even in the most vacant works of new age cabalism or paranoid conspiratorial politics we find at least an illusion of reason-giving or a hoax of argumentation. But, the sceptic argues, the very fact that literature does not have this status brings home the point that literature is independent of ‘argumentative’ forms of writing rather than just a poor participant in the same search for worldly truth.

We can, of course, use a literary text in the pursuit of knowledge, a fact we have known since we examined the indirect humanist of 1.1. If we allow ourselves to blow argumentation into the literary work, we will find that it offers endless ways of coming to know reality. Through our critical reflections on the world of Othello, we no doubt can come into possession of proud truths about our own world, an achievement that requires nothing more than extracting the thematic statements we find there from their literary context and scrutinizing them as positions in a philosophical debate. But unfortunately

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18 Nussbaum often seems to make this error when she argues that while literary texts do not offer knowledge, our commentaries on them do. She takes this claim, as I understand her, to support a theory of literature as a provider of moral knowledge (the sort of cognitive value she is interested in). We see this in Poetic Justice when she claims that a critical conversation with a certain text “provides insights that should play a role (though not as an uncriticized foundation) in the construction of an adequate moral and political theory; that it develops moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality
this is of no help to the humanist. While maneuvers such as this may aid in our pursuit of worldly truth, should we take this step we lose the literary work and thus the very thing the humanist is trying to explain. It requires that we sever the stances, themes and perspectives we find in a work from their literary context and treat them as free-floating propositions, asking what they might tell us about reality if we disregard their place and function in the text and instead treat them as isolated assertions about the way the world is. Yet the entire humanist enterprise is to identify a humanistic literary value, some quality or presence in the text that is at once also revelatory of the our-worldly. The humanist is constrained to describe how literature presents world as a form of literary presentation, as a proper feature of literary content. Otherwise his theory fails to be a theory of literature and reveals itself to be just an explanation of what we can do with a literary work if we steal bits and pieces of it for use as fodder for non-literary discussions. To make such a move is in effect to abandon the idea that a literary work itself can inform us about the way the world is, and at this point it ceases to be relevant to the humanist.

This is a lesson literary theorists have known for a long time. We find it in the old New Critical argument for the so-called “heresy of paraphrase.” As Cleanth Brooks asked us to see, the idea of a work of literature presupposes some degree of inseparability of

out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent...novel-reading will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enhancement of that vision.” Nussbaum (1995), 12. Putnam (1979) makes a similar argument. See Cynthia Freeland (1997) for an excellent discussion and critique of Nussbaum’s and Putnam’s theories of ‘knowledge through literature’.
form and content, some unity of what a literary work says and how it says it.\textsuperscript{19} The literary work of art is not a (so to speak) fungible commodity of communication, as though it relates to what makes it literature as a dollar does to what makes it money. It enjoys certain sanctity, for a presentation of its content in another form — to render it in ‘other words’ in any way — is a violation of the work, a loss of the work itself. In this respect a literary text is unlike ‘argumentative’ texts such as philosophical works. If one can show that there is a paraphrase of Hegel’s \textit{The Science of Logic} that expresses his insight in fewer and clearer terms, we would with good reason prefer it to his work, for it would express the value we would presumably find there (his philosophical insight) in considerably less than the treacherously worded eight hundred pages in which he presented his arguments.\textsuperscript{20} Yet if one values Joyce’s writing, there is just nothing like reading Joyce. Indeed there is no alternative, no replacement. To say that Joyce is a valuable writer of \textit{literature} implies that a paraphrase of his writings is a loss of the very thing that expresses his value as a writer of literature, namely the specific intermingling of form and content we find in his written works. To generalize this, we see that while it may

\textsuperscript{19} The argument for the ‘heresy of paraphrase’ was introduced by Cleanth Brooks in his classic \textit{The Well Wrought Urn}, where we find his famous claim that “the imagery and rhythm are not merely the instruments by which this fancied core-of-meaning-which-can-be-expressed-as-a-paraphrase is directly rendered.” Brooks (1947), 180.

\textsuperscript{20} One reason for this is that the sense or meaning of a proposition by its very nature can be conveyed through any number of sentences (or string thereof) as long as each expresses the same proposition. Thus we can use paraphrase to convey the value of a piece of writing that is just the proposition (the “point”, more colloquially) it pursues. This is not the case with literary or aesthetic meaning. As Brooks would insist, a literary work does not relate to its ‘point’ or ‘theme’ or ‘meaning’ as a sentence relates to the proposition it conveys: a literary work, unlike a sentence, is not a surrogate of a proposition or meaning at all. It is not, if you like, an \textit{instrument} of communication (as a sentence might be) but the communicated object.
be true that through our critical discussion of and philosophical reflection on literary content we can erect positions that make a claim about the way the world is, when we examine these derived positions we are no longer really talking about literature. We quickly find that these derived ‘positions’ and ‘claims’ are aesthetically impure, literally heretical, for they in no way can stand in substitution for the proper object of literary investigation, the text itself. To think otherwise is to fail to take seriously, we might say, the ‘literature’ we find in literary works, which is a rather unpardonable sin if our intention is to say something about the nature of our engagement with a novel.²¹ To move from literary text to worldly truth is to step away from that to which we want to be brought closer. The leap is alluring but unfortunately unavailable to the humanist. As Diffey puts it:

[T]o learn from a work of art, that is, to move from what is shown in the world of the work to an assertion that obtains in the world, requires a refusal of the aesthetic stance...It constitutes a further move, and out of the work, notwithstanding Derridean scepticism about the impossibility of getting out of a text and into something else, to assert of the text, ‘and this is how it is.’²²

²¹ David Novitz offers an oft-cited argument along these lines. He argues that we can learn “cognitive or conceptual skills” from literature. By treating the various perspectives in a novel as suggestions from which we can derive factual beliefs, we find that literature can “offer radically new ways of thinking about reality.” Novitz, (1987) 119. The trouble is that we would have to explain this derivation of factual beliefs in such a way that we can fend off the anti-cognitivist sceptic, and how this is to be done is none too clear (is what is said in the literary text the mechanism of derivation? Does the text generate factual beliefs or do we when we hold up literary content to reality to see what reality has to say about the stances and perspectives found in a novel? — etc.).

²² Diffey (1995), 208-209. Jerome Stolnitz sounds the same note when he writes: “Art, uniquely, never confirms its truths. If we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart, we find the evidence for this great truth in the great world. The fiction does not and cannot provide the evidence. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy [from Bleak House] would doubtless be willing to confirm this, but they are, alas, unable to do so.” Stolnitz (1992), 196.
It is difficult to see what more can be added to the sceptic’s case. The arguments he offered in the previous chapters force us to accept that we cannot take the sentences of a literary text as stating truths, and we now have seen that there is no promise in a retreat to the idea that we can take a literary text as a whole as yielding truths about the world. And so the sceptic claims that literature is cognitively trivial. It does not offer truths about the world, *for it does not even attempt to tell us about the way the world is*. Thus literature cannot be a vehicle of worldly knowledge. The cognition-*qua*-knowledge paradigm, so central to the understanding of how our other core disciplines such as science and philosophy have cognitive value, is inapplicable to literature.

### 3.2 Unfulfilled Knowledge

The truth-seeking humanist has brought us no further ahead, and so we are no closer to finding a way around the problem of cognitive familiarity. We stand just where we did when the sceptic first leveled the charge of triviality against the humanist. He began by telling us that our theory of linguistic humanism runs into the problem of cognitive familiarity by inviting the notion that literature assumes rather than transmits knowledge of the world. And we can see that he is right, at least insofar as his anti-cognitivist arguments appear to make impossible the move to the idea that literature might actually be able to tell us something about the nature of extra-textual reality. So — to return to our old example — if it is true that *Othello* presents jealousy to view, the work nevertheless does not, cannot offer any knowledge of *what jealousy is* in this act of literary presentation.
And we can say the same of any of the aspects of our form of life we find given expression in literature. Literature may hold reality up for view; but the sceptic argues that when it does, it offers it as an aesthetic object, used to texture the interior of the literary artwork, and not as a route to further worldly knowledge.

So what can the humanist do? We might begin by asking ourselves whether there isn’t something unsatisfying with the way both the truth-seeking humanist and the anti-cognitivist sceptic carry out the debate? We feel, or so our humanist does, swindled, as though we have just seen a question of genuine significance proposed and settled in terms in which it was likely never meant to be discussed (perhaps not unlike when we argue with someone who scrutinizes the belief in morality by asking whether its rules are ‘verifiable’ or its propositions ‘empirical’: we feel cheated in being forced to settle the question on this front, with these notions determining the fate of our belief in one of our essential areas of human concern). Nothing is terribly surprising in the idea that literature does not state truths about the our-worldly. Indeed there is a slight prick of embarrassment in stating this point that is likely so transparent to most of us. While we know that literature cannot be ‘cognitive’ in the way the sceptic has shown it cannot be, we also feel that there is something amiss in approaching the issue as both the truth-seeking humanist and sceptic do. We feel forced to let them carry out the debate in these terms because it seems that we must if we want to do justice to the idea — one most of us would not lightly lose — that literary experience is cognitive. But we also find that we are not particularly surprised to learn that this route is unavailable to us. And this is the source of our frustration, for it is unclear where to go from here.
I would even suggest that we do think, though in a sense yet unsettled, that literature ultimately does just trade in the familiar. Othello, after all, is only a jealous husband, Anna just a dejected lover. Indeed, on a moment’s reflection we find that most of the candidates for truths we thought we might find in literature are not exceptionally revealing or insightful. Grandiloquence aside, “jealousy can destroy what one holds most dear” and “anger undoes reason” are ‘truths’ I would think many of us would be ashamed to be ignorant of prior to our reading of Othello and Medea. Once stripped of their fine wording, they actually say something quite mundane, assuming as I am that none of us is shocked to find that jealousy can bring out the savage in us, anger the lunatic. Even if we could learn these truths from literature, we would not much cherish literature on account of it. It would suggest that literature has humanistic value because it can educate the more oblivious among us, and I doubt one would be inclined to place the literary on a very high intellectual pedestal for this reason. As steadfastly as we might wish to cling to the notion that literature offers cognitive rewards, we would not find so counterintuitive the claim that in literary experience we do not come into contact (for the first time, as it were) with new corners of reality so much as we find ourselves drawn to those we already inhabit and know quite well, the everyday realm of emotion, morality, sexuality, selfhood, et cetera.

What I want to propose is that there is no tension here, indeed that we can accept the sceptic’s argument without being a turncoat to the humanist. The sceptic, let us agree, is right to say that literature trades in the familiar. Besides having no ground on which to assert the contrary, it is not an idea we should find particularly alien to our way of thinking about literature. But what the sceptic has wrong is that he believes he has settled the matter, that this admission forces us to give up the search for a cognitive value of
literature. It forces us to give up the idea that literature offers worldly truth and knowledge. But the humanist, I will argue, can accept this without injury to his intuition.

Our humanist claims that there is another way of approaching the issue, one left unnoticed in both the truth-seeking humanist’s and sceptic’s way of framing the problem. We might put it like this at first mention, with a promissory note to give theoretical respectability to the claim in the pages to come. In a word, the idea is that, rather than imparting truths, we might see the cognitive dimension of literature as lying in literature’s ability to operate on the truths we already possess. We ask whether literature might have the ability to work upon the familiar such that we can see the cognitive power of literature as consisting in how it can exploit our worldly knowledge rather than be a vehicle of it.

There is, I want to show, a cognitive act that goes beyond knowledge as the sceptic and truth-seeking humanist conceive it, and we will make this the home of our theory of linguistic humanism.

What we need is a cognitive model on which to base this claim. In developing one, I will rely heavily on Cavell’s distinction between knowing and acknowledging. The distinction is beautifully simple; and if we draw out its implications we can begin to find a way of describing the cognitive dimension of literature that points up a genuine alternative to the sceptic and truth-seeking humanist’s search for worldly knowledge. I should mention, to the extent these things require mentioning, that I do not take what I say here to be straightforward Cavellian exegesis. He uses this distinction to illuminate topics ranging from scepticism and Shakespeare interpretation to Hollywood cinema and moral perfectionism, and I do not pretend here to offer a systematic interpretation of Cavell’s
lithe use of the concept of acknowledgment in his body of work. What I do here is take a small region of his interest in the distinction and let the humanist develop it as he wishes.

I will begin with a suggestive passage from Must We Mean What We Say:

It is not enough that I know (am certain) that you suffer, I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must acknowledge it, otherwise I do not know what (yours, his) "being in pain" means... The claim of sympathy may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things — sympathy, Schadenfreude, nothing. If one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to know that he is suffering? It may or it may not.23

On a shallow reading — the sort Cavell often laments — it may appear that all that is being described here is an appropriate expression of a piece of possessed knowledge, say my reacting, as mere response-behavior, to my knowledge that you are suffering.24 But this is to miss the deeper cognitive point that informs Cavell's use of concept of acknowledgment. His insight is that there is a territory of understanding that is left unmentioned by our standard talk of knowledge, one which is revealed in our various successes and failures of acknowledgment.

The cases that best bring this territory into view are those in which we find a failure of acknowledgement with an apparent success of knowledge. In the above passage,

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24 Specifically, his lamentation is that critics often take acknowledgment to pick out nothing more than a feeling or moral sentiment that is expressed in appropriate response behavior. As he says, "This idea [of acknowledgement] has been criticized on the ground, roughly, that in offering an alternative to the human goal of knowing, either it gives up the claims of philosophy to reason or else is subject to the same doubts that knowing itself is. Perhaps this takes my idea as offering something like a mode of feeling to replace knowing...but I do not propose the idea of acknowledgement as an alternative to knowing but rather as interpretation of it, as I take the word "acknowledge," containing "knowledge", itself to suggest (or perhaps it suggests that knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging)." Cavell (1988), 5.
Chapter Three

Between Truth & Triviality

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it is implied by my ability to describe you correctly as suffering that I possess knowledge of 'what suffering is'. I show by my accomplishment of identification that I know what counts as an instance of suffering. I reveal that I am competent enough with this concept to cut up reality according to it; and if I can individuate objects according to a concept, I have, at the very least, met the minimum requirement for counting as a knower of this concept. But a tension arises in certain cases, one which points up a limitation of the concept of knowledge for yielding a fully circumscribed notion of worldly understanding. As Cavell suggests, my failure of acknowledgment when I know that you are suffering tempts us to say that in some sense I cannot really know what suffering means. For surely if I did, your suffering would make some claim on me, would spur some response to your condition, however minimal and of whatever sort. We find that our intuitions are jarred in these cases, for as much as my act of identification tells us that I am a knower, my — for want of a better phrase — expression of this knowledge intimates that something is amiss in my mind, that against everything I nevertheless cannot really know this.\(^{25}\) We feel pulled in two directions: we want to say that what I do warrants as much as it argues against the idea that I really know what I am saying. So we have to ask what it is that is missing, for we know that something is. My knowledge is in place. But the failure of my knowledge to go on to take the form of acknowledgment reveals a hollowness in how I

\(^{25}\) Of course it can be more complicated that this. In some cases failures of acknowledgement may imply failures of knowledge. Acknowledgement takes knowledge as a cue, and a failure to know will yield a failure to acknowledge. Or I may fail to acknowledge because I just do not care, or because some other piece of knowledge I possess inhibits my acknowledgement of your suffering. We can come up with an infinite number of examples of this sort, and admittedly one will have no trouble countering what I say with examples that suggest other ways of explaining the failure of acknowledgment I discuss.
understand what it is that I know, an emptiness or confusion in some larger region of understanding that surrounds this knowledge. And the question becomes how might we describe this region? What sort of understanding does it address?

To help answer this let us imagine a person I will call the Simpleton. The Simpleton, we will agree, is a sort of mere knower. He looks at a wounded person and rightly says "you are in pain." But the Simpleton 'behaves' with his knowledge in such a way that we find a certain vacancy in his grasp of what it is that he is saying. I ask him whether he thinks your injury is serious, to which he offers an earnest "yes." But he offers his 'yes' with no inflection of interest, without any gesture that hints that by this 'yes' he understands what he is thereby called on to do (say, as Cavell does, "whatever can be done"). As I begin tending to you, I yell to him that he ought to call for an ambulance. He nods in sincere agreement and then falls still. And when I tell the Simpleton that you might not recover without his assistance, he responds with an honest "that's right" and then lapses back into inactivity. The Simpleton succeeds in every case of knowledge, for he consistently reveals that he knows the 'truth' of the matter (that you are suffering, that this implies that you require aid, that the consequences are severe should we ignore this...). But there is nothing more in the Simpleton's mind than this mere knowledge, no further awareness of what this knowledge calls for. The failure of acknowledgement we see in the Simpleton shows that he is only capable of the 'identification of pain, not with
it.\textsuperscript{26} He has no further relation to your pain beyond his knowing it, beyond his ability to correctly identify your suffering and the rest of propositions this entails.\textsuperscript{27} In this sense we see that his knowledge is idle, lifeless, for his mind goes dead precisely when it ought to become animated. In a word, he is an idiot who just happens to know as much as we do, an eerie sort of idiot savant. The cognitive flaw lies not in his ‘knowledge’ but in his mind’s inability to move from knowing to what this knowledge calls on one to do. What we see in the Simpleton is a failure to grasp what we might call the \textit{demands} of knowledge, the claims knowledge makes on us. The hollowness we see in the Simpleton’s mind is not an absence of proper knowledge but an incognizance, if you like, of the sets of responses to which this knowledge is tied and through which we naturally expect it to declare itself.

Let us look at a quite different failure of acknowledgement, that of a character we might call the Sadist.\textsuperscript{28} Both we and the Sadist succeed in identifying Medea as suffering. But precisely those aspects of the play that are tragic make it comic to the Sadist: Medea’s suffering summons the Sadist’s laughter. His laugh is neither the laugh of the cynic who wants to mock the play’s attempt to tug at our hearts nor of the crank who wants to be scandalous, should we think that he is just trying to jolt the pleasure we take in the play. It

\textsuperscript{26} This is a formulation Cavell is well-known for exploiting. As he says in one of his various discussions of acknowledgement in \textit{The Claim Of Reason}: “my identification of you as a human being is not an identification of you but \textit{with you}.” Cavell (1979), 421.

\textsuperscript{27} Lamarque (1996) finds an interesting parallel with what we are describing as the failure of acknowledgement in current neuropsychology, namely the cognitive disorder found in those suffering from Capgras’ Syndrome.

\textsuperscript{28} Though I use this character much differently, I borrow the idea of the Sadist from Russell B. Goodman’s (1985) discussion of acknowledgement.
is a sincere belly laugh, without any tinge of callousness or posturing, and shocking for this reason. He reacts to Jason’s betrayal of Medea as though he is watching a burlesque. He chortles at Medea’s murder of her children as though it is a punch-line to an outrageously funny joke. Naturally we are disturbed, for the Sadist strikes us as entirely deranged. Yet just as with the Simpleton, we find that with every question we put to him the Sadist betrays that he knows what suffering is. Thus the derangement we detect in him is not a matter of his failure to cut up the world aright, as though he sees something that is not really there. He sees precisely what is there — suffering — and he looks the lunatic because in his mind laughter issues from this knowledge. We seem to see in his response our concept of suffering uprooted and planted in unfamiliar soil, grounded in a context alien to the one in which we rest it, the comic instead of the tragic. Horror films, whatever we may think of them as artworks, offer endless examples of this. What is disturbing in a film like Fritz Lang’s M or a movie like Jonathan Demme’s Silence of the Lambs is not merely Franz Becker’s killing or Hannibal Lecter’s cannibalism. The sense of the horrible these characters conjure in us is in large part a matter of their showing us how deformed and unsettling our concepts become when they are severed from the practices to which they are conventionally bound and wed with monstrous ones, ‘love’ as expressed through the act of murdering children, ‘food’ as the consumption of human flesh. Likewise the Sadist’s situating of ‘suffering’ in the laughable does not reveal an absence of knowledge so much as a displacement of it, a failure to station his knowledge of suffering in the web of contexts that we take to be its natural home (the tragic, the pitiable, the sorrowful — whatever you will). He seems so separate from us because the concepts we share with him make such a foreign claim on his mind. And what we want to say is that by his failure to
hang his knowledge on the appropriate hook of response, the Sadist reveals a
disfigurement of understanding, one consisting not of botched knowledge but rather of a
broken link between his concepts and the corners of our form of life to which they are
tied.

The Simpleton and Sadist reveal a certain flaw of mind, one which is confessed by
their failures to acknowledge (at all, in the case of the Simpleton; aright, in the case of the
Sadist) the knowledge they share with us. The Simpleton suffers a failure to understand
how knowledge, we might say, configures the knower as an actor on the concrete stage of
life, how it throws one into the world. I called this a failure to grasp the "claims
knowledge makes on us," and the Sadist shows us that these ‘claims’ are akin to what is
often described as claims to a community, that through our successes and failures of
acknowledgement we announce our participation in (or estrangement from) a shared form
of life. In each of these characters a particular territory of worldly understanding is made
visible, a form of insight that is revealed, as it were, by its absence in their minds. The
point I want to advance is that it is a form of understanding that concerns not a grasp of
the ‘truth of the matter’, knowledge of the nature of the bit of reality before them. It
consists in a mind’s attunement with what is better described as the role a piece of
knowledge plays in a form of life, an awareness of how it grounds us in a specific weave
of human culture — ‘suffering’ as both presenting and pushing us into that region of our
world called the tragic.

I will conclude this section by bringing the concept of acknowledgement in line with an
aspect of the language-reality relation that our humanist has already brought to our
attention, namely the role criteria have in securing our alignment with the world. The Simpleton and Sadist offer us an occasion to refine the concept of criteria, and indeed I introduced these characters in part to lead us back to this notion that has been so invaluable in building our theory of linguistic humanism. The point is quite simple, and we need only say a few words to make clear the connection between these notions.

Criteria, as we know, describe the ground on which we confront reality. They have the role of explaining how language presents an orientation towards reality, how we are able to "word the world together." In short, criteria specify what counts as reality for us. Now what is interesting to us here is that in explaining this we can identify two allied yet discrete ways in which criteria tell us 'what counts'. And these two senses of 'counting' in turn illustrate how the concepts of knowledge and acknowledgement each express a particular way of relating to the world.

Our discussion of criteria up to this point has largely dwelt on the first sense of how criteria tell us 'what counts,' as a matter of what counts as an instance of a concept — one thing a stone, another a sufferer, this a table, that a jealous husband. This sense of 'counts' concerns how language, through criteria, tells us "what kind of object anything is," as an issue of the individuation and identity of the nature of the things in the world around us. Yet in the last chapter we also saw how deeply cultural the notion of criteria is. We saw that in specifying our criterial relation to reality we are lead not to metaphysical or theoretical objects but are rather brought directly into contact with the bedrock of our

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29 Cavell (1979), 316.
social practices. As we put it there, when we query our criteria for ‘what something is’ we investigate a concrete cultural form that specifies the role a concept has in our form of life, a structure of living agreement in virtue of which we are able to word this world together. The second sense in which criteria ‘count’ concerns this social call of criteria. If the first sense emphasizes our ability to speak of things in the world — a matter of what counts as an instance of φ — the second sense emphasizes the place of these things in our world — a matter of why and how φ counts for us. The notion of criterion unites under one concept these affiliated yet distinct aspects of how we align ourselves with reality, the conditions of worldly identification and the cultural values that are expressed in these very conditions. A criterion pronounces both how we count the world and how this world counts for us, as two faces of the same notion. If I may be permitted a long quotation, Stephan Mulhall offers an account of the distinction as I want to recommend it:

We might summarize the role of criteria by saying that criteria tell us what counts as an instance of something. But this link between the concept of criteria and the concept of counting involves two facets of the meaning of the latter term...On the one hand, criteria are criteria of individuation: in determining what counts as a table, they determine whether any given object falls under that particular concept or rather some other...On the other hand, criteria manifest what counts for human beings: by determining how human beings count one thing from another, how they conceptualize the world, criteria trace the distinctions and connections which matter to them — the distinctions which count. The structure of the concepts themselves is an expression of human interests, of which aspects of the world we deem significant enough to wish to get a grip on...Agreement or attunement in criteria is thus a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, a sense of similarity, outrageousness, and so on — much of what Wittgenstein means to capture with the idea of forms of life.\(^\text{30}\)

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\(^{30}\) Mulhall (1994), 153.
The application of the notion of criteria to the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement should be clear. Knowledge, as we find it in the Simpleton and Sadist, concerns this first sense of how a criterion ‘counts.’ It records a facility with dividing the world up rightly and correctly describing its particulars, a grasp of ‘what something is’ as a success of identifying this as that sort of thing. Acknowledgement has as its object the second sense of how a criterion counts. It reveals a grasp of why we divide up the world this way and so how a particular pushes us into the world when we describe it as thus and such. In a word, it is through acknowledgment that we give expression to the fact that we speak a living language, that the criteria of our language animate a form of life. When we speak of knowledge we describe a certain intellectual relation to the world. And what the Simpleton and Sadist showed is that this leaves unmentioned its ‘flesh’, its concreteness — that it is something we not only identify but live in. The concept of criteria underscores this point, that we have, if you like, both an intellectual and embodied relation to the world. It pieces together these two facets of our relation to the world. Likewise, the movement from knowing to acknowledging reveals a mind that is in full possession of how criteria perform this piecing together. To put it simply, if criteria unite into one concept the (broadly put) semantic and social dimensions of language’s alignment with the world, the concept of acknowledgement repeats this union at the level of mind’s alignment with the world.

This discussion of criteria should also make clear that the concept of acknowledgement does not specify a region of mind that is different from that which knowledge concerns, if we mean by this that acknowledgement describes some alternative or independent route to worldly understanding. Just as when we discuss the two ways in
which criteria 'count' we are not speaking of two distinct criteria, when we move from knowledge to acknowledgement we are not crossing borders between foreign spheres of understanding. The difference is between a completeness and incompleteness of understanding, not two disparate ways of relating to the world. Knowledge, as we said at the beginning of this discussion, must go on to take the form of acknowledgement — otherwise there is a sense in which we cannot really know what it is that we are saying. And what we mean by this is that these two concepts describe a fullness of understanding, as two elements that together assert an achievement of one motion of mind. As Cavell says in In Quest of The Ordinary:

Acknowledging is not an alternative to knowing but an interpretation of it. Incorporating, or inflecting, the concept of knowledge, the concept of acknowledgment is meant, in my use, to declare that what there is to be known philosophically remains unknown not through ignorance (for we cannot just not know what there is to be known philosophically, for example that there is a world and I and others in it) but through a refusal of knowledge, a denial, or a repression of knowledge, say even a killing of it.  

Flourish aside, the ‘killing’ Cavell speaks of here emphasizes that when knowledge does not go on to take the form of acknowledgement, our concepts and words become ossified. It fails to connect these concepts and words to the fabric of our culture, which is itself the condition of their vitality. The failure of acknowledgement reveals a mind to which only one face of the criterion appears, and so a mind that is only half-aware of the world. It betrays, if you like, an inability to see that our criteria with which we

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31 Cavell (1988), 51
'count' our world also count us as among its inhabitants, that they weave us directly into the scenes we describe in our various acts of knowing. Without the capacity for acknowledgement, our awareness of the world is drained of this connection to concrete life which our criteria blow into our words and concepts. In this state our knowledge of the world is idle, ghostlike — the killing Cavell speaks of is in this respect quite literal. What we see then is that the concept of acknowledgement picks out a standard for the attribution of a wholeness of understanding to a speaker.\textsuperscript{32} For it testifies that our knowledge of the world is at once also animated by the world, that there is no gap between the two — that we possess our criteria completely. In a word, acknowledgement describes knowledge as \textit{fulfilled}. The concepts of knowledge and acknowledgement are confederate notions. Together they function to record this completeness of understanding, just as the two faces of a criterion express the fullness of that criterion.

If what I have said in this section is reasonable, then surely we want to describe the difference between the acknowledger and the Simpleton, the sane person and Sadist, as cognitive. In each case, though the same knowledge is in place, we see drastically different manifestations of intelligence, clear differences in the understanding of the meaning of the words one is using. If we are tempted to refuse to call the feature of understanding announced by the concept of acknowledgement "cognitive," I would venture

\textsuperscript{32} As Cavell says of the concept of acknowledgement: "It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated." Cavell (1969), 108.
that it is because — oddly and sadly — we do not have the right cognitive term to
describe it, though my argument is that “acknowledgment” will work quite well for this
purpose. To give into this temptation is to allow the vocabulary of truth and knowledge to
hoard all of our cognitive terms, to treat them as the sole terms of cognitive illumination.
And this betrays a rather severe philosophical prudishness, a stodgy stubbornness to term
“cognitive” a concept that expresses the fulfillment of knowledge just because it cannot be
described in the precise vocabulary of knowledge. If acknowledgment reveals a
significant dimension of linguistic understanding, indeed if it describes a completeness of
our grasp of the world, I see no reason at all not to call it cognitive.

3.3 Literature as Acknowledgement

We can now return to the anti-cognitivist sceptic. Our problem was this: the sceptic
challenged that even if it is the case that literature presents reality to view, it in no way
yields knowledge of it in this act of presentation — thus his claim that literature does
nothing more than offer idle visions of a world we already well know. This much, he
argued, flows from the source of our trouble in this chapter, the problem of cognitive
familiarity. But what we are beginning to see is that the charge of triviality does not so
easily follow from the fact of familiarity, and this is the point on which the sceptic’s case
hangs. If ‘knowing’, plainly put, does not exhaust the range of possible cognitive
experience, then a textual form that cannot lead us to knowledge of the world will not on
this account be cognitively trivial. We accept that we know those corners of the world
literature brings to view (or, again, at least that it cannot be the case that we come to know them through literature). But this turns out to be a claim the humanist can graciously embrace, for it gives him a ground on which to proceed. It is not a problem set in his way but a point of departure. We have found a form of cognition that itself presupposes the possession of knowledge to take shape. And the humanist argues that literature, by standing upon our knowledge of the world, is thereby able to address this further region of worldly understanding.

The requirement of knowledge (or the impossibility of acquiring knowledge through literature), far from stifling the possibility of a theory of the cognitive value of literature, turns out to be a remarkably meager condition. It requires only that we are as smart as the Simpleton, as aware of the world as the Sadist, which is not much of a requirement at all. And the humanist wants to say that literature can operate on that territory of understanding, tremendous indeed, that these characters make visible to us. Now surely most of us are not as lacking of mind as these characters, and I do not want to be misread as making the silly claim that literature assumes that we are all of us simpletons and functions to fill in what would remain an empty region of mind without it. But, the humanist reasonably says, surely most of us, with our (in varying degrees)

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33 An earlier version of this chapter invited a misreading I am here attempting to prevent, namely that if we try to solve the problem by claiming that literature can offer acknowledgement — the claim the humanist is obviously directing us towards — this implies that literature has cognitive value only for those of us as void of mind as the Simpleton. My natural inclination is to say that this way of reading the humanist is about as right, and as wrong, as reading the claim that philosophy’s cognitive value consists in its offering knowledge as implying the claim that it therefore takes as its audience the idiots among us, that it has value for those of us with no knowledge — as though the claim that Plato can illuminate the good life suggests that one who stands to learn from him must be in utter darkness about all matters moral and
less dramatic lives, do not possess a comprehension of how jealousy or suffering configure human life with the precision of detail and depth of vision we find in the works of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky (as it is sometimes said, literature is a great ‘force of particularization’). We might recall Iris Murdoch’s elegant phrasing of what is really the same idea:

The greatest art shows us the world...with a clarity which startles and delights us because we are not used to looking at the real world at all.34

As the humanist argued in the last chapter, literature, perhaps uniquely, is able to present to us our words, our concepts, as they most fundamentally connect us to those cultural practices that constitute and delimit the boundaries of the our-worldly. And what he wants to claim here is that the concept of acknowledgement presents to us a way of seeing how this ‘startling’ clarity of literature’s presentation of life can reveal something crucial about our cognitive relation to the world.

Now there is nothing surprising we need to reveal about literature, no hitherto unnoticed feature of a novel we must unmask, to make explicit precisely how literature might do this. There is certainly no need to imitate the truth-seeking humanist and try to twist literary content in the hope of finding a way to treat it as a participant in the same ethical. The problem, as I understand it to be a problem, is not whether literature can correct ignorance or fill in utterly blank spaces in our worldly understanding but most basically one of whether literature can declare, expose, map a certain territory of our cognitive relation to reality. Of course, if we can show the latter, we can then say that literature can work, when needed, to correct the former, and so we open the door to any number of forms of cognitive therapy literature might offer.

34 Murdoch (1970), 34.
game played by philosophy, to which the sceptic has shown it will never be more than a very poor cousin (hardly a disillusioning claim to humanists who never had the urge to cast literature in this light to begin with). We give up this idea altogether, and with it the temptation to commit literarily unconscionable acts such as treating Othello the Moor as a proposition about the way the world is who just masquerades as a fiction in Shakespeare’s tragedy, literature in general as a form of truth-directed discourse which for some reason chooses to moonlight as fictional narrative. If we place the cognitive value of literature on the pedestal of acknowledgement rather than knowledge, we can see that explaining the cognitive element in literature requires none of this. We accept that literature does the only thing it incontestably does, present fictional lives lived in a fictional world, fictions that while bringing corners of our world into view nevertheless do not speak truths about this world (rather than the boundaries of their own).

Simply put, the humanist wants us to see that if Othello is to illuminate our understanding of jealousy, we do not at all need Othello to tell us anything about what jealousy is. To make the move from knowledge to acknowledgement, we need only Othello himself, not as a spokesman for Truth or a minister of Knowledge, but Othello this supreme animator of the knowledge of jealousy we bring to the text. We do not need to find a way to get Othello to forfeit his fictionality and become something he manifestly is not (say as a truth-claim donning a dramatic persona) to secure a connection with the cognitive. We need precisely his fiction, this Moor of Venice who offers us the story “of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplex’d in the extreme.” (V.ii.345-7). It is in this, in this thoroughly fictitious tale, that we see all we need to see to understand how *Othello* can effect its particular enlightenment. The general claim that has been lying on
the lips of the humanist for the past ten pages is that acknowledgement requires precisely what literature is in a position to give it: narrative, a story of human activity, for it is through this that *Othello* can provide the knowledge we bring to the text with the completeness of understanding that marks a mind that is in full possession of its knowledge. Let us follow this idea.

Recall that we earlier (2.3) said that there is a significant sense in which we can say that Iago is our word for racism. Likewise, and with the same instructive bombast, let us say that Othello is our word for jealousy. Now if this is so, a fair summary of the sceptic's argument in this chapter is that we nevertheless do not, cannot, learn this word from literature. But what the humanist argues is that this is no loss, that Othello's gift to the mind lies not in his giving us knowledge of the word, but — to attribute to him another's power — in the fact that *in* him we see "the word made flesh."35 If you like, Othello animates our worldly understanding by offering our knowledge his flesh. His is only fictional flesh, to be sure. But fiction, as I argued in the last chapter, is consummately capable of bringing the bedrock of our form of life into view. And what we are beginning to see is that in bringing it into view, *Othello* does not merely reflect our world back to us in the same form in which it presupposes that we are familiar with it. *Othello* returns to us this knowledge as embodied, as placed on the concrete stage of cultural practice and human comportment. That is to say, Othello acknowledges the knowledge he asks us to bring to the text. He calls upon it so that he can then go on to push it into that region of

35 *John* 2:15.
understanding left unmentioned in the sceptic's anti-cognitivist arguments. The sceptic's arguments do not prohibit literature's entry here, and this is where we now see that literature can direct us.

We might again borrow from Cavell:

Language is an inheritance. Words are before I am; they are common...Writing is a matter, say the decision, of life and death, and what this comes to is the inheriting of language, an owning of words, which does not remove them from circulation but rather returns them, as to life.36

Though Cavell is not speaking about literature in particular, the humanist wants to make this leap, to say that what his argument amounts to is the claim that literature assumes our knowledge but only so that it may offer it back to us "as to life." As we saw, the concept of knowledge is silent about whether our understanding of the world is vital or idle; we saw that when our knowledge has not gone on to take the full form of acknowledgement, we have minds that know but whose knowledge is oddly immaterial, strangely removed from the world, as though we see it but from a distance. Of course, this distance comes in degrees, ranging from the extreme case of a character such as the Simpleton to what I presume is the state of most of us, namely reasonably acculturated people but nevertheless people who have not been afforded the wealth of experience and insight that would come with having lived the lives chronicled in our greatest works of literary narrative. Literature takes this as its cue, speaking to the mind by addressing and attempting to overcome this

distance. Literature has a unique and profound ability to present our world to us not as a conceptual object but as a living world. And it is thereby able to take what is dull, wooden, or tenuous in our understanding of how our words and our concept unite us with our world and inject it with this essential vitality of understanding, giving our knowledge back to us “as to life.”

As we saw in the last section, the concept of acknowledgement describes a proper form of understanding, one with a unique object: a grasp of the bond between the conceptual and the social. What the humanist wants to say here is that literature’s cognitive power lies in its ability to bring this bond into full view. Now literature does not do this, of course, by declaring a truth about this connection, by stating, in propositional or otherwise discursive form, what this link consists in. Nor would it help the humanist if it could. As we saw in the example of the Simpleton, this sort of understanding shades into knowledge rather than acknowledgement, and it thus fails to take us where we want to go. Literature does not make a claim to the effect that this piece of knowledge puts that practice before us. It shows us our knowledge as claimed by a corner of our world. And if what we have said so thus far in this chapter is at all convincing, we can see that this describes not a minor or peripherally interesting form of cognitive illumination. It amounts to an offering of the sort of cognitive awareness possessed by one whose words and concepts succeed in carrying him fully into his world.

We often think that the gap between mind and reality is closed by knowledge, that when we come into possession of truths about the way the world is, we overstep the space between thought and reality. The concept of acknowledgement reveals the possibility of a
residual gap; it shows that the concept of knowledge alone does not express understanding as it reaches all the way into the world. And the claim the humanist wants to secure is that it is this remaining divide that literature is capable of addressing and overcoming. Take the following example, one which I think should bring into full light the claim the humanist has been pursuing in this chapter. Imagine that legacy of texts we take to define our literary tradition laid out in a line. Next to it, we lay out those texts that define our philosophical tradition. Someone — imagine not a simpleton but one more like an alien — puts to us the question of what each of these textual traditions documents about our relation to the world, what she, if she should read through each of them, would come to learn about the way our world is. Most of us would find at least half of this question easy to answer. We would say, whatever else we might say, that what those texts which constitute our philosophical heritage trace and give testament to is our conceptual relation to reality, say our culture’s claims to knowledge. Now there is an initial difficulty, a slight confusion, when we turn to our literary heritage. We wonder what literature, given the uniqueness of its manner of worldly presentation (to wit, fictional presentation), could possibly record about our relation to the world. What the humanist has shown is that the mistake is to think that we need to find a way to describe literature as in some way doing what philosophy does (a temptation many humanists have felt since Plato pitted poets against philosophers). And what is liberating about the humanist’s argument is that we now see that we can avoid this temptation without fearing that we will thereby make literature speechless about our cognitive relation to our world. Simply put, if those textual forms such as philosophy trace our culture’s claims to knowledge, literature, far from being inferior, sets its goal further. By weaving the knowledge it assumes into the fabric
of the social, literature traces and gives testament to the bond between our words, our
concepts, and the concrete body of our culture. And in so doing, literature records not the
first but the final word in our culture's awareness of its world, the word that effectively
concludes the story we have to offer of the nature of our world as we experience it and
find ourselves within it. We might say that if we had only philosophy texts, we would
have a chronicle of only half of our relation to our world. There would be an emptiness, a
silence about what lies on the other side of this gap that knowledge alone does not bridge.
Literature is that corner of intellectual activity that archives how understanding fully
crosses this remaining divide between mind and world. It is not in competition with
philosophy, but, in its highest form, literature is the completion of its project.

In conclusion let us return to the notion of criteria, the notion that since the last chapter we
have invoked when we need to give precise technical definition to the humanist’s account
of how literature presents our world to view. As we saw in this chapter, the sort of
knowledge the sceptic shows us literature presupposes is in essence a matter of our grasp
of our criteria. If the humanist claimed in the last chapter that literature's manner of
worldly presentation is a matter of its bringing to view our criteria for the way the world
is, we saw here that literature in no way can offer knowledge of these criteria in this act of
presentation. But as we also saw, the sceptic requires that we know them only in the
incomplete way in which the Simpleton and the Sadist know them. In a word, he requires
a mere awareness of how they 'count' the world by offering us grounds for identifying
and describing its furniture aright. This is what is presupposed by our ability to identify
Othello as jealous, Dostoevsky's confessor as a sufferer; this is what literature assumes we
know, these basic grounds for identifying ‘what sort of object anything is.’ And this leaves open for literature’s exploration a great expanse of worldly understanding, at any rate more than enough for the humanist to show that literature’s presentation of our world is crucially and manifestly cognitive.

The humanist’s solution to the sceptic’s challenge amounts to the claim that literature, while assuming our knowledge of how criteria ‘count’ in the first sense, is able to go on to expose their other face, revealing, in effect, how our criteria function to weave us into this world they allow us to know — ‘anger’ as placing us within Medea’s world, ‘jealousy’ as bringing Othello into ours. What the humanist’s argument amounts to is the claim that literature is able to piece our criteria together, and in so doing, piece together the two facets of a mind’s relation to the world, what we have called the intellectual and the embodied, knowing and acknowledging. In short, literature can reveal our criteria in their completeness. And what this entitles us to claim is that while literature may not offer knowledge of the world, it is able to take our knowledge and return it to us as fulfilled. If this is so, nothing could be more mislaid than the charge of cognitive triviality.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Fictional & The Real

It may, indeed, be that life is chaos, as you tell me that it is; that its martyrdoms are mean and its heroisms ignoble; and that it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvelous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon — Oscar Wilde.

I HAVE GIVEN my argument for linguistic humanism. With the conclusion of the last chapter I have completed what I hope to be a plausible model for understanding the two basic ideas to which any theory of humanism worth its name must give sense: that we can see our world in literature and that this seeing is cognitively significant. What I would like to do in this final chapter is to relax the discussion a bit and offer some general observations on the notion of fiction. I will use a discussion of two positions from extreme corners of the currently fashionable theories of fiction as an occasion for these reflections. The positions I have in mind are poststructuralist anti-realism or ‘textualism’ and the so-called ‘mimesis as make-believe’ trend in analytic philosophy of literature. I choose them because I take them to be excellent representatives of two very common ways of approaching the relationship between reality and fiction: plainly put, the ‘radical’ one of dismissing the distinction altogether and the ‘conservative’ one of contrasting these terms
such that fiction is turned into an imaginary version of the real world. Neither alternative is particularly attractive to our humanist. Without the distinction between reality and fiction, he loses the basic terms of his theory; and if fiction is just make-believe, it seems we have to say that we pretend to see, rather than actually do see, our world in literature. In explaining precisely why these theories are inadequate, I hope to bring into view a few basic strictures of common ways of understanding what we are saying when we describe literature as fiction.

What we will gain from this discussion is an idea of where the linguistic humanist sits in the spectrum of currently marketed moves in literary theory. But these positions are not merely helpful for clarifying the humanist’s relationship to popular theories of literature. What we will find is that in very different ways these competing theories will cast a doubt on an idea that the humanist has assumed throughout this essay, namely that the basic attitude we take towards fictional content can be open to reality in the way the humanist requires it to be. The question concerns the general nature of what is often called the ‘fictive stance,’ the attitude we assume when we treat some described state of affairs as fictional. Panfictionalism and the make-believe theory, though in quite different ways, treat the fictive stance as opposed to, or at least by nature a turning away from, an appreciation of reality. And this in turn will raise a very basic concern about whether we can be engaged by literary works as the humanist claims we can be. The humanist clearly wants to say that the frame of fiction can open up a view of reality, that one and the same appreciative attitude can be directed towards both the fictional and the real. And the theories I will discuss here will call on the humanist to give plausibility to this idea in terms of the basic stance we assume when appreciating fictions. I will conclude this
chapter by showing that far from being an odd or unfamiliar idea, the humanist relies on a very intuitive and pervasive understanding of how we relate to fictions.

4.1 The Threat of Panfictionalism

I will begin by examining an argument that lately one finds discussed in virtually every work in the philosophy of literature that touches on the question of the nature of literary fiction. Indeed, these days it is virtually impossible to describe yourself as working in the philosophy of literature without having someone ask you your stand on this argument. If any current philosophical or literary critical argument has made its way from university courses into the consciousness of the educated public at large, it is the argument for what I will call panfictionalism,\(^1\) the thesis, to put it roughly at first mention, that all forms of discourse are at the end of the day equally alike in being forms of fictional discourse. It might best be described, or so I will suggest at the end of the section, as a ghost argument, for I am not sure that the theorists held responsible for panfictionalism promote it in a way that would make it a genuine threat. It has become a bit of a bogeyman at any rate, and so it would be fitting to say a few words about it.

Positions which might fairly, if not loosely, be called panfictionalist have enjoyed quite a bit of currency in both contemporary literary theory and philosophy, on both sides

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\(^1\) The term "panfictionalism" is not standard. I take it, I believe, from Dolezel (1998), though I am unfortunately unsure of the precise source from which I took it.
of the ocean, endorsed in one guise or another by philosophers and critics as diverse as Nelson Goodman and Jean-François Lyotard. One respect in which some prominent Anglo-North American philosophy and Continental theory have overlapped is in denying that there is a sustainable distinction between what is made up and what is discovered, between the bits of the known world that are culturally constructed and discourse dependent and those that are just 'out there' and free of any linguistic and cultural trappings. This itself is hardly a new claim, if we keep the history of anti-realism in mind. But in the last twenty years certain literary-critical movements have developed it in such a way that this old position at least seems to have been given very new clothing. I have in mind here panfictionalism as we find it in French and North American poststructuralism and postmodernism, the region of current theory with which we habitually contrast (helpfully or not) 'analytic' philosophy.

In its most notorious and arguably excessive form, we have the wing of postmodernism typified by the later writings of Jean Baudrillard. To gloss a fairly familiar position, Baudrillard has popularized the idea that in our age reality has been lost and replaced with "hyperreality." We live under the tyranny of what he calls simulacra, a sort of cyber-world in which symbols have effectively overtaken and banished the symbolized, ousted the reality our linguistic signs once stood for. Baudrillard's postmodernism, and

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2 If one has difficulty seeing why Goodman would be included in this list, his idea that we have not a world but world-versions, and even more basically his idea that worlds are made, not found, is the reason for his inclusion in this group. See his Ways of World-Making (1978) and On Mind and Other Matters (1984).

3 See, for example, his In the Shadow of Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social and Other Essays (1983a).
the school of thought associated with it, might playfully be described as what we would have if Marshall McLuhan had written Don Dellilo's *White Noise*, the belief that media has usurped message sung as a dirge for contemporary culture. A characteristic claim might be:

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation.4

If we generalize Baudrillard's musing on Disneyland into a description of contemporary culture at large, we have what we might call the 'pop' version of panfictionalism, the territory of critical theory which is likely responsible for the fact that so many analytic philosophers, for better or worse, are unwilling to take seriously anything that goes by the name of "postmodernism" or "poststructuralism". What we might call 'proper' panfictionalism, the form of panfictionalism I am specifically interested in here, comes from another corner of postmodern/poststructuralist thought, and it is none too difficult to pinpoint exactly which. When we find on the back cover of one of the most prominent recent works of analytic philosophy of literature blurbs such as "The establishment has been sitting like a rabbit for too long in the headlights of literary theory," and "An excellent and accessible account of fiction, which is used to dissect the pretension of postmodernist literary theory," we just know, even if no names are

mentioned, whom the authors have in mind. It is the region of critical theory that is identified not with Baudrillarian ‘pop’ panfictionalism but most conspicuously with Derrida and the Yale School, the very academically active form of deconstruction-inspired philosophy and criticism that has dominated North American departments of literature since the 1970s.

The basic form of the threat they purportedly pose is thought to lie in their taking philosophy’s core distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and falsity, referring expression and referent, and deconstructing them into oblivion, attempting to pull out from beneath us the traditional foundation on which investigations into the nature of literary-fictive writing have been built. Terry Eagleton captures as well as one could want the basic form of panfictionalism with which these theorists are thought to threaten us.

It is a mistake to believe that any language is literally literal. Philosophy, law, political theory work by metaphor just as poems do, and so are just as fictional...literature for the deconstructionists testifies to the impossibility of language ever doing more than talk about its own failure, like some barroom bore. Literature is the ruin of all reference, the cemetery of communication.

And Stanley Fish might also be mentioned here:

When we communicate, it is because we are parties to a set of discourse agreements which are in effect decisions as to what can be stipulated as fact. It is these decisions and the agreement to abide by them, rather than the availability of substance, that make it possible for us to refer, whether we are novelists or reporters for the New York Times. One might object that this has

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5 The book is Lamarque and Olsen’s Truth, Fiction and Literature (1994), and the blurbs are from Richard Gaskin and David Novitz, respectively.

6 See, for example, John Searle’s “Is There a Crisis in American Higher Education?” (1993), for a characteristic voicing of the threat this wing of poststructuralism is thought to pose.

7 Eagleton (1983), 145-146.
the consequence of making all discourse fictional; but it would be just as accurate to say that it makes all discourse serious, and it would be better still to say that it puts all discourse on a par.  

Unlike Baudrillardian ‘pop’ panfictionalism — which, as even the sympathetic often concede, tends to trade in sweeping pronouncements elicited from fairly flighty critical observations — in its highest form deconstruction (and related regions of poststructuralism) bases its panfictionalism on the detailed scrutiny of concrete texts, arguably as a radicalized appropriation of New Criticism’s method of ‘close reading.’ And the fear concerns what these theorists seem to be claiming to have discovered from their readings: in a word, and as Fish says, that all forms of writing are equally fictional. The perceived threat is that it seems that panfictionalists want to claim that every writer who has based his investigation into literature on the assumption of the uniqueness of works of fiction is seriously misguided. Indeed, it looks like the thesis of panfictionalism is simply claiming that there is no justification for making a basic contrast, as we have, between what Dolezel describes as world-constructing and world-imaging texts. The implication appears to be that the entire frame of the debate in which our humanist engages is irreparably damaged, to be thrown aside. For if every form of discourse has the logic of

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8 Fish (1980), 244-3.
9 For example, see the discussions of Baudrillard in McHale (1992), Bertens (1995), Selden and Widdowson (1993), and Best and Kellner (1991).
10 It is for something like this reason we find the these dictums in poststructuralist literary theory, Derrida’s claim that putatively literal or nonfictional texts are “those in which the metaphor has been forgotten,” (Derrida, 1976, 34) Christopher Norris’s claim that, “literary texts are less deluded than the discourse of philosophy,” (Norris, 1982, 21) and de Man’s curiously apocalyptic proclamation that, “philosophy turns out to be an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands of literature.” (de Man, 1979, 115.)
fictional discourse, if all can be reduced to imaginative construction, narratives woven
creatively and not by objective discovery, then the humanist must be misguided, block-
headed really since the distinction on which he bases his investigation is metaphysically mute.

Or so it would seem. But let us take a step back. Clearly, and as we saw when we
discussed what I called the poststructuralist drift in 1.3, there is a threat to a great number
of core philosophical ideas here, from the notion that facts and fictions enjoy a different
metaphysical status to the possibility of extra-linguistic references. From here it is very
easy to make the leap to the conclusion that panfictionalism implies that there is nothing
of substance in the distinction between literary fiction and works of nonfiction, between
texts that function to depict our world and those that depict fictional worlds. The question
is whether this conclusion is warranted. I will call this the no-difference thesis, and I will
treat it as claiming that the position described above destroys without remainder any
theory of literary fiction that takes seriously the distinction between works of fiction and
nonfiction. As we will see, it is only the no-difference thesis that poses a genuine threat to
this distinction. And that panfictionalism does not imply this thesis is very easy to show.

Now if we wanted, here we could rehearse the anti-sceptical arguments given in
chapter two, for we might notice in panfictionalism a tendency to try to get between word
and object — which our humanist has argued against at length — by making wholesale
claims to the effect that language fails to connect us to reality (as would appear to underlie
the claim that all discourse is "fictional"). But the argument I have in mind is not so
technical. Indeed it is altogether pedestrian, and I think effective for this reason. It
recommends itself without requiring any stance towards the thesis of panfictionalism, and
so it can be accepted regardless of where one stands in relation to the line that divides the radicals from the conservatives in this debate.

The basic idea is this: while — let us say for the sake of argument — there may be any number of interesting respects in which it is possible to collapse the fact/fiction distinction, within the practice of reading various texts it makes all of the difference whether or not we read something as fiction or nonfiction. In short, regardless of whether the objects of each type of text turn out, on metaphysical reflection, to be fictitious, we still can give solid ground to the distinction. The question is social, a matter of what sort of attitude is called on by the practice, cultural at root, of appreciating a work as a work of fiction. I begin only with the assumption, quite uncontroversial I would think, that if I present you with a text and tell you that it is a work of literary fiction, you would not read it in the same way you would if I presented it to you as (and convinced you that it was) nonfiction, regardless of whether you are a wild panfictionalist or a rigid realist. And from this I think it is a very easy step to see that we explain this by stating that it is because you know, if you at all understand the practices of reading fiction and nonfiction, that while one sort of texts asks to be read as attempting to describe our world, the other does not.

It is quite irrelevant to the distinction between fiction and nonfiction whether all narratives — historical, philosophical, literary — are equally ‘made-up’, groundless. If we embrace panfictionalism, we will believe that those texts that feign to represent the world will always fail to give us what they promise, that they will never do anything more than proffer what turn out to be fictions. But notice that we can speak of failure here, that we can say that they are deluded in believing that they can aspire to show us reality. And it is
very revealing that we would never say that a literary text fails in this respect as well, for the obvious reason that we do not even treat works of literary fiction as having this aspiration, that we do not regard them as players in this sort of game. And this appears to support what has been repeated throughout this thesis: while we use, generally put, the criterion of adequacy to ‘the way the world is’ when evaluating standard forms of nonfiction, we do not when evaluating literary fiction. Panfictionalism may offer reasons for rejecting the traditional ways in which we explain this notion of adequacy (we lose, among other things, the concepts of truth, correspondence to the facts, reference to extra-textual reality), but it in no obvious way tells us that there is no interesting distinction to be made between the structure of appreciation and logic of evaluation we apply to the writings we find in Scientific American and Granta. In short, regardless of whether we accept or reject panfictionalism, what we are beginning to see is that we still have a way to maintain a distinction between how different sorts of texts attempt to relate us to the world.

The point is so transparent that one finds himself with a bit of a red face in stating it. Need it be said, even if one regards works of history and science as both teeming with fictions, if he reads them as he reads a work of literary fiction, he would be engaging in a glaring act of cultural incompetence. For this is the best we could say of someone who when discussing his culture does not or cannot distinguish the world he finds in Orwell’s 1984 from the one he learns about in his 20th Century History course in high school. And when we explain this incompetence, in no obvious sense do we need to invoke a theory of facts and fictions, or any theory at all. It is not because of a particular theory of the possibility, say, of extra-textual reference that we can say that while a Rough Guide travel
book speaks about the ‘real’ Venice, *Othello* describes a fictional version of the same city. It is to say what we have said throughout this thesis, that while in the first case the text is read as trying to depict particulars and happenings found in the actual world, in the second it is not.

This point will be given some strength in the next section, but the claim at hand is that each brick in the wall that separates fiction from nonfiction can be accounted for in pragmatic terms, in the vocabulary of a convention-based practice — what we might describe as the socially prescribed rules of reading. Once we see that the contrast can be explained on the level of convention, the type of reflections panfictionalism offers do nothing to threaten the basic distinction between fiction and non-fiction. As Dolezel notes, “if reality is called fiction, a new word for fiction has to be invented.”11 In other words, even if we accept panfictionalism, at best we will find ourselves with a contrast between texts we take to offer fictional worlds and those we take to offer representations of our ‘fictional’ reality: we still will have justification for believing in the uniqueness of literary fiction. It may be the case, let us concede for the moment, that everything we call a fact is really only what Bentham called a ‘fiction of convenience,’12 that ‘reality’ is just a fiction to which we have allotted special privileges in our language games. But if this is so, without a tremendous amount of additional argumentation, claims of this order in no way suggest that we should regard literary fiction and nonfiction as both pointing the reader in

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11 Dolezel (1998), X.
12 See Bentham (1951).
the same direction, towards the worlds of narrative fiction. The reordering of our 
metaphysical assumptions about the nature of ‘reality’ may cause shifts in what we 
understand to be the objects of straightforwardly empirical descriptions, but it will not in 
any conceivable way remove the wall we place between Othello’s world and ours. If we 
take the metaphysical substance out of our understanding of the difference between these 
two worlds, we are left with the very thick residue of conventional distinction, thick 

enough to show that a great space still exists between the two. And this reveals the no-
difference thesis to be indefensible.

Panfictionalism tells us what counts as fictional — everything — but not what 
counts as a work of *literary* fiction. It makes a claim about when narratives describe 
fictitious objects — always — but not when they are narratives of *fictional worlds*. 

Panfictionalism in no conceivable way suggests that philosophical honesty calls on us to 
remove the Fiction and Nonfiction designators we find in bookstores. To be sure, the 
distinction is no more challenged by the sort of theoretical observations panfictionalism 
offers than the everyday distinction between past and present is by the theory of relativity 
or McTaggart’s Paradox. If McTaggart was right, we will need to change the theory with 
which we explain the practice of using this distinction. But we would not say that the 
distinction is to be completely abandoned, as though we would think one a great fool 
should she still distinguish her past from her present. Likewise, panfictionalism at best 
threatens what we believe to be the available range of theories for explaining certain 
routine ways of contrasting the kinds of objects described in fiction and nonfiction. It in 
no obvious way threatens the distinction itself.
I think we can see the bogeyman. For panfictionalism to be any sort of threat to the
distinction between fiction and nonfiction as we have relied on it, it must amount to a no-
difference thesis. But this is patently false, as alluring as the inference might be when we
find a Hayden White or a Terry Eagleton arguing that ultimately every form of discourse
succeeds no more than narrative fiction in describing non-discursive reality. It is an
interesting question for metaphysics, semantics, and discourse theory, but not for us.
Indeed, as it is promoted by those who are considered a threat, panfictionalism is always
presented on either metaphysical or semantic/linguistic grounds, a theory whose point is to
deflate the claim, for example, that philosophy and science are more sophisticated than
literature because they attempt to get outside of their own textuality and touch reality. It is
a sign of the blurring distinction between the work done by philosophers and literary
theorists that literary theorists are entering into this debate, not an indication that they
have hijacked core philosophical notions and used them to wreak havoc on our
commonsense notions of the different ways works of fiction and nonfiction engage our
appreciation. To be sure, as far as I can see panfictionalism is the old dish of idealism
served up by literary theorists, seasoned differently than philosophers might be used to,
but essentially a contemporary version of a very ancient plate — and no more relevant to
issues of the distinction between different types of texts than idealism has ever been.  
13
And to my knowledge none of the theorists held responsible for panfictionalism ever
claims otherwise. I have always found it very telling that even Stanley Fish, one of the

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13 See Rorty's "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" in Rorty (1982) for a convincing discussion of this.
most noticeable proponents of panfictionalism, does remind us that his arguments raise a
question about the "status of the 'facts' we oppose to fictions, not that we cannot make a
distinction between reading fiction and nonfiction."\(^{14}\)

There is an 'optimistic' upshot of panfictionalism, and we should notice this before
closing this discussion, since I believe that any humanist should take it to heart. Proper or
Derrida/Yale school-inspired panfictionalism, as I understand it, is essentially used as a
foil against the literally crude but still prevalent idea that because works of literary fiction
are 'made-up', they are at best charming play-things: entertaining but ultimately empty
texts that are to be set aside from the cognitively valuable writings of philosophy and the
hard and soft sciences. In other words, proper panfictionalism is at least in part motivated
by the desire to undermine traditional reasons for denying literature the status of the
serious, reasons that since Plato have lead many philosophers to dismiss literature as often
beautiful and amusing but basically trivial. I would venture that this explains much of the
allure panfictionalism has for the serious admirer of literature. And this motivation to
restore dignity to literature in the face of the charge that its fictionality makes it frivolous
is admirable, a desire that should motivate any viable form of humanism.

Nevertheless, we do seem to pay an obviously high philosophical price for this.
And I think that in paying this fee, we ironically find that we get what we want much too
cheaply. We put literature on a par with other forms of writing by vulgarizing the

\(^{14}\) See Stanley Fish (1980), 197.
competition, making every form of writing have the same flaw that is traditionally used to deny literature membership among the serious forms of writing. What we should rather try to show, as our humanist has, is that literature can be seen as having an equal claim to bringing us into contact with what the putative ‘heavy’ forms of writing do. It is hard to imagine anyone sympathetic to humanism accepting panfictionalism for this reason, and I hope the arguments I have given for linguistic humanism in the previous chapters make clear how far from this aspect of panfictionalism our humanist stands. The authors who have given us ‘proper’ panfictionalism have been invaluable for forcing into the debate a reevaluation of the idea of literature as somehow a ‘non-serious’ form of writing. But we would do best not to adopt their precise strategy for undermining anti-literary prejudices.

4.2 The Limits of Make-Belief

If poststructuralism has swept through literature departments, the theory I will discuss here has, at least since the 1990 publication of Kendall Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, been the dominant model of literary fiction in Anglo-North American philosophy of literature. Interestingly, what I will call the ‘make-believe’ theory of literature has had little influence on literary theory at large. It is certainly known by everyone working in the field, but it is a model used almost exclusively by those who receive their paychecks from philosophy departments in English-language universities. A likely reason for this, I will suggest in this section, is that for all of the light it may shed on certain problems of the philosophy of language, it turns out to yield a very counter-intuitive theory of literary
fiction, naïve really, as I think a few simple observations will suffice to show. I discussed the basics of the position in 1.3 when I went over the analytic drift, and here I want to add a few more observations to make clear why I do not think the theory can be reconciled either with an understanding of literary fiction or the construction of an adequate theory of humanism.

I will begin with a little scene setting. I think that it is fair to say that the make-believe theory is best seen as arising not out of a literary tradition (as poststructuralism might be seen as growing out of structuralist poetics) but rather out of one of the mainstays of 20th Century analytic philosophy of language, the problem of truth and reference. As they flowed from Frege and Russell to the positivists, studies in these areas reintroduced the problem of fiction to contemporary Anglo-North American philosophy (or rather, gave it the centrality it had been enjoying in continental phenomenology since the mid 19th Century). The basic problem might be plainly put as the trouble of "non-referring descriptions." It is found in a great variety of cases of reference, from counterfactual and hypothetical claims to assertions about the past, but arguably best exemplified by the puzzle of talk about fictional objects.

The insight which leads to the current trends in analytic theories of fiction is that traditional empiricist tendencies to make correspondence to reality the basic ingredient of meaningfulness yield very unsatisfactory theories of the logic and structure of fictional discourse. For obvious reasons, we will run into great difficulty when we encounter propositions with fictional content if we are beholden to a model of language that tells us (for example) that sentences derive their meaningfulness from their truth-conditions, and that truth-conditions are explained in terms of relations of correspondence between
sentences and actual state of affairs. We can well guess that any frame of this sort will at best give us very crude tools for speaking about fictional content, as Russell made very clear when he argued that sentences describing Hamlet "are all false because there was no such man."\(^{15}\) Clearly this is unacceptable. If a theory of reference forces us to group every sentence that does not correspond to reality under the heading of the false, we end up with a position that implies that a fictional narrative is linguistically on a par with fibs and falsifications, as though reading a work of fiction is not unlike hearing faulty travel directions or a straightforward lie.

Moreover, and more irritation to our intuitions about literature, it just cannot be right to say that the proposition "Hamlet was mad" is false. With the work of Shakespeare in hand as a justification, we seem to have a very good reason for believing it, for his Hamlet certainly was mad. Of course the sentence "Hamlet was mad" is not true of the actual world, since Shakespeare’s Hamlet was never a resident of it. But surely this sentence enjoys a kind of truth, however deviant its particular brand of truth may be. We know that it will not be an empirical truth, but we are in possession of an inadequate theory if for this reason we have to call it a falsehood. By the 1950s we see a significant amount of philosophical work put to showing fiction to have a logic that is independent of standard descriptive or empirical speech.\(^{16}\) The developments in theories of language, the various distinctions between meaning and use, between assertion and pretense, theories of

\(^{15}\) Russell (1962), 277.

\(^{16}\) Most notably, the work of philosophers such as Monroe Beardsley, John Hospers, Arnold Isenberg, and Margaret MacDonald. The collection of articles in Barrett (1965) includes many of the seminal articles written on this subject in the 1950s.
speech acts and illocutionary acts, were developed at least in partial response to counterintuitive claims forced on us by the models of reference inherited from the first half of this century.

The most prominent members of the make-believe movement — I have in mind here Walton, Currie and Lamarque and Olsen — often take as their first step in this debate the denial that the property of ‘being fictional’ is a semantic property.\textsuperscript{17} The step is quite essential. The basic insight is that questions of a sentence’s truth-value cannot distinguish between the false and the fictional, as we might have noticed in Russell’s infelicitous comment on \textit{Hamlet}. They cannot distinguish between a text that is not true of reality because it is just \textit{wrong} (say Aristotle’s theory of substance in the \textit{Metaphysics}) and one that is not because it is a work of fiction. Indeed, semantic properties cannot even distinguish the \textit{true} from the fictional. We might imagine that the entirety of a science fiction novel will eventually come to have the property of being ‘true-to-the-world’, that the future, by a grand act of chance, unfolds just as it does in the latest \textit{Star Trek} novel. But if so, we would not then say that while it once was a work of science fiction it has suddenly transformed itself into a historical work (as Currie quips, “It makes good sense

\textsuperscript{17} This is not to say that fictional sentences have no semantic relations or properties, of course. Once we fix the ‘universe of discourse’ of a literary fiction, we can speak of it as referring to or stating truths about objects and events in this universe (the words of \textit{Hamlet}, in other words, state facts about Hamlet). Thus the above argument is also not the same as arguing that we cannot have a semantic theory of \textit{fictional reference}, which many possible worlds theorists of fiction offer. Should it be worth saying, the idea is that questions of \textit{worldly} truth, reference and representation will not determine fictionality. This is compatible with the claim that we can account for the fictional world a novel creates by describing how the sentences that make up a literary narrative refer to or otherwise represent the world of that text. Dolezel (1998), Pavel (1986) and Eco (1990, chapter 4) have offered influential accounts of this. In 1.3 I gave an overview of this strategy.
to ask when a work was popular, but it would be bizarre to ask when it was fictional).

We would rather have a reason for asserting that what makes a literary work fictional does not reside in the truth-values of the sentences we find in a work of literature. (If a less playful example is desired, think for a moment of a New Journalist novel like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or the general genre of the historical novel, examples of works of literary fiction whose content is by and large true of the world.) In short, that a text is fictional is not explicable in terms of semantic properties, for they are incapable of identifying what makes a work *a work of fiction*.

The question then becomes: what makes a work fictional if we cannot account for this in terms of the relation between the language of the text and the world? The strength of the make-believe theory is that it has done very much to show that what makes a discourse fictional is to be explicated socially, in terms of a practice rather than in terms of linguistic and semantic categories. We capture the independence of fiction from questions of a sentence’s relation to reality by describing a practice that mandates certain rules of reading, introducing certain attitudes of appreciation and barring others. It is an insight that mirrors in many ways the move from the semantic to the social in many prominent analytic theories of meaning, and its results are much the same. If the concepts of truth and reference cannot explain what it means to be fictional, we relocate fictionality to the

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18 Currie (1990), 11.
19 One obvious example of this is the move from truth-conditions to assertibility-conditions that characterizes many of the social theories of meaning that have been popular since Wittgenstein (or at least since Saul Kripke’s work on Wittgenstein and rule-following).
category of cultural convention and practice. As Lamarque and Olsen put it, the invocation of practice and convention

[S]erves to emphasize that fiction is grounded in activities of a certain kind not, for example, relations of a certain kind (e.g. between language and the world). Second, it requires that this grounding be social (rather than, say, psychological) at least in the sense that works of fiction can only be given this role in a social context. Finally, there are normative implications; there are right and wrong ways of engaging in the practice.²⁰

So far, so good: I would think that anyone who reads the standard texts of the make-believe theory will find that the studies of the social basis of fiction they offer justifies the amount of time one must put into reading their typically very lengthy books. Now the immediate question is the obvious one: how do we explain this practice? What is the precise attitude it tells us to bring to a work of fiction?

The name of the theory gives it away: the fictive stance is primarily a matter of *make-believing* the content of works of literary fiction. For the make-believe theorist, the fictive stance essentially consists in treating works of fiction as prescribing make-beliefs.

We might consider an example here, one that follows the standard form make-believe theorists use to illustrate this idea. Imagine a boy playing ‘army’, call him Little McCarthy. In his house he finds an old army field jacket, on the lapel of which are inscribed his father’s rank and last name. Though the name and rank designate the father and not the boy, once the boy dons the jacket and begins to play, they take on the role of props in a game of make-believe. In the context of the child’s game, the words on the

²⁰ Lamarque and Olsen (1994), 34.
jacket are given the role of making it 'fictional' or 'make-believe' (the two are interchangeable) that the boy is General McCarthy: they generate this fictional state of affairs. Likewise the words and descriptions we find in a literary work are to be read as projecting a make-believe world. The words that make up a work of fiction have in their standard or primary use the function of designating and describing real objects and actual states of affairs (as the written name and rank on McCarthy's jacket do). But once placed under the scope of an attitude of make-belief, they take on the role of describing 'facts' about a world of make-belief, generating fictional truths about its contours. Currie puts it very clearly:

When we read and become absorbed by a work of fiction we may find compelling images before our minds, but a work of history or a newspaper article can stimulate the imagination in the same way. What distinguishes reading fiction from the reading of non-fiction is not the activity of the imagination but the attitude we adopt toward the content of what we read: make-belief in one case, belief in the other.21

We should also quote Walton's famous passage:

In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels, we must first look at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children's games of make-believe. Indeed, I advocate regarding these activities as games of make-believe themselves, and I shall argue that representational works function as props in such games, as dolls and teddy bears serve as props in children's games.22

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21 Currie (1990), 21.
22 Walton (1990), 11.
It is important to see that for these theorists, make-belief is not simply an attitude we take towards the particular sentences in a text which we know are false of the world. It is a comprehensive attitude, used, we might say, to preface our involvement with the entirety of a novel. Now of course the make-believe theorist must claim this for the sake of consistency. Otherwise the theory would fail to be a theory of the stance we take towards fictional texts, for the obvious reason that without this stipulation it would function only to explain our attitude towards its sentences which are not true of the world, thus leaving the sundry accurate geographical, historical, psychological (etc.) descriptions we find in literary texts unaccounted for. Since virtually every work of literature is teeming with such descriptions, this would amount to a failure to offer a theory of what it means for something to be a work of literary fiction and instead reveal itself to be just a theory of fictional sentences. In any case, it would be a reintroduction of the idea of a semantic theory of fiction, implying as it would that calling something a fiction is determined by its failure to be true of or to correspond to reality. Thus we subsume a work under the fictive stance, described as a rule-governed attitude that has the implicit form of “it is fictional that ‘...’” (which is translatable without loss of meaning into “it is make-believe that ‘...’”\textsuperscript{23}), with ‘...’ filled in with the content of a literary narrative or propositions descriptive of literary content.

\textsuperscript{23} Though it is difficult to find theorists who agree on the precise translation schema. The nuances between, for example, “it is make-believe that”, “it is make-believe true that”, or “‘...’ is true in a game of make-believe” turn out to be quite significant, depending on other theoretical commitments. Currie (1990) explains well the challenges of finding an intuitive translation schema.
It is easy to see why a philosopher would find the make-believe theory so attractive. If we once felt that as much as it cannot be *false* that Hamlet was mad it nevertheless cannot quite be *true*, the make-believe theory offers us a logically tidy way of making sense of this. If we once thought that neither belief nor disbelieve can quite capture our attitude towards fictional content, the make-believe theory provides an elegant remedy. My concession that it is not properly *true* that Hamlet was mad (he never *was*, so he never was mad) does not imply, as Russell seemed to think, that this proposition is false. It is *fictionally* true, a proposition that describes correctly an imagining prescribed by the text of *Hamlet*. If we do not believe that *Othello* lived in Venice (for he never lived at all), we are no longer forced to concede the unsatisfactory implication that we therefore disbelieve it. We neither believe nor disbelieve it: we *make*-believe it.

If evaluated from the vantage-point of 20th century analytic philosophy of language, the make-believe theory is very impressive. Given their philosophical endowment, it is a considerable improvement over many of the earlier models for explaining talk about fictions. For this reason I doubt that anyone who has tried to trace the problem of fiction as it made its way from logical atomism and positivism and into the present will fail to appreciate how much the make-believe theorists have raised the standards of analytic philosophy of fiction. Nevertheless, once we switch perspectives I think the make-believe theory begins to appear quite counterintuitive. If we step outside of the frame in which it is often evaluated — as a chapter in analytic philosophy’s investigation into problems of reference and truth — and ask whether it seems reasonable to describe our involvement with literary works as a game of make-believe, it begins to lose its glow.
The Achilles' heel of the make-believe theory is the comprehensiveness of attitude it asks us to bring to literature, namely the extent to which it claims make-belief expresses our basic orientation toward literary content. As we just saw, the make-believe theorist's account of the fictional operator subsumes not only a text's non-referring (or patently false-of-the-world) sentences under its scope; it assimilates the entire content of the story into the game of make-believe. And as we also just saw (and as we surely know without being reminded of it), a tremendous amount of literary content is world-adequate, which is to say that should we hold it up to empirical scrutiny we will find that it is true of the world. We realize this as soon as we shift our attention from descriptions of, say, Sherlock Holmes' physical features (an annoyingly common example given by many of the make-believe theorists) and consider, for example, many of the descriptions of London in a Dickens novel, American culture of the 1930s in a Fitzgerald novel, the long disquisition on whaling in *Moby Dick*, the passages about Napoleon's invasion of Russia in *War and Peace*, to give a few of the most cited examples. As a matter of course literature borrows freely from our store of worldly facts in the construction of its fictional worlds, and so with just a moment's reflection we realize that an extensive portion of literary content is not in any sense 'made-up', a construct of imaginative invention.

Now I have argued throughout this thesis that we know to *read* these world-adequate sentences as functioning to state 'facts' not about our world but the world of the work of fiction. We suspend our interest in their truth for the sake of our participation in the novel. The same basic insight is also common to the make-believe theory, and up to this point we are allies. But notice that on the make believe-theory a further step is taken, to the idea that we *make-believe* these sentences to be *true*, that we include factual content.
under the scope of "it is make-believe that". This is a very strong claim, and we should not overlook how much it demands of us. The question at hand is whether it makes good sense, or any sense, to say that we make-believe sentences occurring in a work of fiction which we know are empirically adequate or true of the world? If the answer is no, as I will argue it is, given the fact that so much of literary content has a factual basis, the make-believe theory will show itself to be implausible.

A very simple point suffices to make clear precisely how much the make-believe theorist asks of us. If I say that I am make-believing a certain proposition, it implies that I expressly do not believe the truth of the proposition, in other words that I will assent to the claim that it is false. Nothing could be more intuitive. If I tell you that I am pretending that I am writing a chapter right now, the implication would be that I am not (really) writing a chapter right now. And if you see that I in fact am writing my chapter when I tell you this, you would think something is quite wrong with my mental state, that at the very least I am deluded about whether I am or am merely pretending that I am writing my chapter. The reason for this is simple: the proposition "I am make-believing that I am writing my chapter" implies the falsity of the proposition that "I am (really) writing my thesis." In the same vein, when I read the swell of sentences in a literary text which I know to be true of the world, what gives any credibility to the idea that I am pretending or make-believing them to be true, that, as Lamarque puts it, when I find a sentence of this sort I "imagine or make-believe (but do not believe)" it? I do not believe it? I do not believe that a literary text uses these descriptions to make truth claims about the way the world is — I do not read them as asserted by the text of reality — but it is another, and altogether stronger, thing to say that I make-believe them. In the first case, there is no implication that I am
committed to the falsity of the description. In the second case, as we are beginning to see, there is. Thus considering that literary fiction habitually constructs aspects of its narrative upon a commonly known factual foundation, the make-believe theory invites the charge that it ends up building if not outright contradiction then a quite palpable tension into the basic attitude it claims we bring to a work of literary fiction. Christopher New, whose criticism of the make-believe theory I am following closely here, puts it well when he writes that:

Competent speakers of English would judge "I am pretending" (or making-believe or non-deceptively pretending to myself) that I am famous, and "I also believe that I am famous" as absurd as they would find the sentence "I intend to pay the bill and I also believe that I have paid the bill" absurd. They would find it absurd for the same reasons they would find the sentence "I assert that it is raining, yet I don't believe that it is raining" absurd: in each case, the speaker denies in the second part of his assertion that a condition for the truth of the first part — that he is pretending (make-believe), intends or asserts — has been fulfilled. True, it may be possible for someone both to assert that \( p \) and also not believe that \( p \). But then he will believe that \( p \) and not believe that \( p \); that is, he will have inconsistent beliefs.\(^\text{24}\). 

In this respect it appears that the make-believe theory just reintroduces, in inverted form, the traditional problem of fiction and belief. Plainly put, the standard problem is that if we try to treat literature as offering beliefs about our world, we inevitably will end up knocking our heads against its fictionality (as we saw clearly in the first and third chapters). Likewise, in introducing the concept of make-belief, we end up tripping over those portions of literary content, immense indeed, that we know have a factual basis. And this turns out to be quite devastating for the make-believe theory. The attitude the theory

\(^{24}\) New (1996), 160.
asks us to take towards literary content of this nature is a bold breach of an argument, christened Moore's Paradox, that has the status of a golden rule in logic and epistemology, namely that it is *unintelligible* to describe one as believing what one knows is false. For precisely the same reasons, we cannot make sense of the idea of make-believing what one knows to be true. Since literary content is teeming with truths of all sorts, this turns out to be a quite serious problem for the make-believe theorist.

What the make-believe theorist has right is that we do not take the various world-adapted sentences we find in a literary text to be asserted of the world, as though we think that a novel interrupts its construction of a fictional world at these points and suddenly, inexplicably, begins to make reports on how things stand in the world. This much puts us on common ground with the make-believe theorist. But if we take the extra step, as the make-believe theorist does, of asking that we make-believe these sentences, we build into literary experience a quite nasty clashing with what we in fact do believe about the world. Besides making our appreciation of literature quite literally childish (I just cannot think of what else we get from calling it a game of make-believe), it turns our appreciation of literature into a place where our normal beliefs about the world become troublesome guests. We have to ask ourselves what would make the theory attractive at this point, why we should want to add to the standard and reasonable claim that we understand literature to have the luxury of speaking in independence of truth the claim that we *make-believe* that what it says is *true*. In the first case we push aside the relevance of truth and belief when we appreciate literary content. In the second case we reintroduce it, only now in the form of *fictional* truths which we *make*-believe, and in so doing we find ourselves straddled with new and unnecessary burdens. We do want to capture (as the
sceptic has shown us in detail) the independence of literary appreciation from questions of truth and belief. But we do not want to do this in such a way that we turn this independence into an antagonism, that we end up creating a friction between our worldly beliefs and our engagements with the content of a novel. Any adequate theory of literary experience will give us independence without conflict, and the make-believe theory fails to provide this.25

The argument I have given concerns a small hole in the logic of the make-believe theory, and of course every position has its holes. But it is much more than a mere logical or semantic quibble. For this hole functions to reveal a very large gap between the make-believe theory and our general intuitions about how we relate to literary fiction: we just do not appear to be playing a game of make-believe. The step from the sensible point that we do not take accurate sentences in literary texts to be asserted of the world to the claim that we make-believe them just looks so unnecessary, so excessive after we give this argument. As far as I can see, there is no remaining reason to accept the make-believe theory, particularly given the availability of a great number of less demanding and substantially more intuitive theories. Indeed, this is the most common criticism we find

25 At this point it is quite common to ask whether Walton (or make-believe theorists in general) offers an intuitive or acceptable account of what a game of make-believe is. For the very reasons we are giving against the idea that we can take such a comprehensive attitude of “it is fictionally true that” or “it is make-believe that” to literature, we can ask whether it makes sense to claim that a child takes this sort of comprehensive, sweeping attitude of fictionality towards all of the bits of reality that are assumed or explicitly used in her game of make-believe (is the tea still tea, or is it fictionally true that this is a cup of tea; of those very real friends she invites into the game does it become “make-believeledly” true that they are her friends, etc. It should be easy to see how unlikely Walton’s theory will become if we continue to query it along these lines). In short, it seems unreasonable to attribute so much make-believing, so much pretending, even to a child’s game of make-believe. I do not want to go into an examination of what we call games of make-believe, since it would take me too far off course. But this would be an obvious critical strategy.
made of the make-believe theory, that it is just so intuitively unlikely that we are doing what make-believe theorists claim we are when reading fiction. And this, as simple a criticism as it is, is most effective. Anders Pettersson puts this point clearly and effectively:

My conviction that Currie and Walton’s analyses are incorrect is due mainly to the fact that I myself, as far as I know, never play games of make-believe when reading literature. As I read the Old Man and The Sea, I follow the unrolling of events, well aware that these are fictitious, and I react to what I read. I have what is sometimes solemnly called a literary experience. But I do not seem to enter a world of a game of make-believe, where I read an authentic account of the old man or listen to a veracious report about his actions (to do so to me seems entirely uncalled for: my feeling is that it would mix my literary experience with aesthetically irrelevant fantasies)...There are thus experienced fiction readers who deny, explicitly, that they use literature in the way Walton and Currie’s theories postulate. This is clearly embarrassing for the theory.26

Noël Carroll is also worth quoting:

I do not wish to deny that the consumers of novels, pictures, films and the like are active, but I am not convinced that they are involved in all of the role-playing Walton adduces. For example, when I read Gone with the Wind, I understand its propositions, but am I also additionally involved in a game of make-belief in which fictionally I know that Rhett Butler is dashing and debonair and Scarlett O’Hara is devious and determined...For example, we might think of fictions as invitations to entertain or suppose certain propositions as unasserted — supposing them without commitment. Fictions invite this stance. When I read a fiction it is not the case that I fictionally know Silas was a miser; rather, as I read, I entertain (as unasserted) the proposition that Silas was a miser.27

26 Pettersson (1993), 89.
A general moral can be found in the failings of the make-believe theory. I think that if we look at the problem as it makes its way from Russell to Walton, we see a trap that we must avoid, namely the temptation to allow our reflections on *fictions* to determine our theory of *literary* fiction. To put it very simply, the tradition that leads to the make-believe theory begins with the example of sentences that describe patently ‘made-up’ objects or states of affairs (the sentence “Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street,” for example), and it attempts to model fictional texts on this. But nothing seems more obvious than that to call a text a work of literary fiction is not thereby to claim that it is *from beginning to end* a continuous string of sentences all of which are fictional in the sense of being ‘made up.’ Literary texts are saturated with descriptions of every sort — psychological, historical, geographical, sexual, cultural — that are true of the world, or at least can not be modeled on the made-up. In short, we do not want to model our understanding of a literary text on our understanding of a fictional sentence, for a viable theory of the latter — which the make-believe theory arguably does provide — will not give us a plausible theory of the former. Now no one would deny this, and I do not want to be taken as implying that any make-believe theorist actually does. But I think that I can fairly say that the make-believe theorist fails to take it *seriously*, to see how at odds with this fact his theory is. And this is what the argument I have given functions to draw to our attention; it is on this count that I want to ground my basic charge that it is a literally naïve theory. The make-believe theory is best left to studies in the philosophy of language and mimetics — where it seems to be quite useful — and not imported as a model for literary theory. Walton, with admirable wit, claimed that Searle suffered from the “Have Theory, Will Travel” syndrome when he tried to import his speech act theory to the study of literary
We would not be too far off the mark to bring the same charge against the popularity of make-believe theories of literature in analytic philosophy.

The larger motivation for my reluctance to accept the make-believe theory is that it seems ill suited for a substantive theory of humanism. Indeed it looks to be ultimately a return to the picture of fiction as just fodder for fantasy, and this picture has never been helpful to humanists. There is no clear way to understand how we could use the vocabulary of make-belief to account for the idea that we can see reality in the fictional worlds of literary texts. The call to identify our appreciation of a literary text with a game of make-believe amounts to cutting ourselves off from the directness of appreciation I have argued for. At the end of the day the attitude of make-believe builds into the fictive stance an antagonism with reality, a divide between our reality and the make-believe reality of a text — a gap it is none too clear how to bridge. And it does this, ironically, in its attempt to bring literature closer to reality. If we argue that we read fiction as though it were real, make-believing that we are viewing actual people and events, we do, as the make-believe theorists argue, give our engagement with a work of fiction the vividness, the hue, of our-worldly experience. But the price we pay is that we make impossible the move from the idea that we pretend see our world in fiction to the claim that we actually do see it, for the make-believe operator brings everything in our field of appreciation under its scope. Perhaps just as ironically, our humanist has argued that we can make sense of the ability to see reality in literature only if we treat literary fiction as offering a

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28 Walton (1990), 76.
diversity of other worlds, more like traditional possible worlds than pretend versions of our own. We let fictional worlds float away from ours rather than try to bring them nearer through the operations of make-believe, and we find that we can see our reality in these other worlds, perhaps as we might speak of seeing ourselves through another's eyes. For the remainder of this chapter I will explore this idea, but here I want to conclude with the comment that the faults of the make-believe theory show us that we should accept a strong thesis of fictional worlds, that they in effect are appreciated as other worlds, and as not playful, pretend versions of our own. If we do not see this, we will not be able to give literature the social and cognitive force the humanist claims it stores. For in bringing fictional worlds too close to the actual world, we end up building a wall between the two, trapping ourselves in a game of make-believe rather than securing the possibility of a properly serious engagement with reality.

4.3 A Case for Openness

Neither the panfictionalist nor the make-believe theorist poses a real challenge to the basic humanist claim that we can see the our-worldly in literature. Contrary to a common fear, panfictionalism does not suggest that the humanist cannot speak of texts as directing us towards reality, for on scrutiny we saw that panfictionalism offers no reasons to deny the basic idea that we can read texts as directing us towards our world. And since the make-believe theory does not stand up under scrutiny, we needn't worry that the humanist ought to replace talk of seeing world in literature with talk of seeing make-believe worlds. But
these discussions do raise a question for the humanist, a very small but crucial point of concern.

We might begin by putting the issue as follows. The question we inherit from the previous discussions is in essence a matter of how we might reconcile two stances. The first stance is what we have been calling the fictive stance, the basic attitude we take towards the content of literary works. The second might be called the worldly stance, the stance that describes our attitude when we appreciate some described state of affairs as (plainly put) functioning to illuminate reality. We might in turn say that each of these stances describes a frame within which we interpret various types of texts and discourses, namely whether they are to be read as revealing something about our world or a fictional world. The humanist, of course, wants to say that the frame of fiction can also offer a window to the world. If one is sympathetic to the theory of linguistic humanism I have offered in this thesis, she will not believe that reality cannot be found in fictions. But the previous discussions of panfictionalism and the make-believe theory ask us to clarify this claim on the level of how we relate to fictions. We need to make reasonable the claim that the fictive stance can be open to reality in the way the humanist requires it to be, as a question of whether one and the same attitude can be open to reality while expressly treating its object as fictional. In a word, if read not as a theoretical puzzle but as a call to describe the stance we take towards fiction, the previous discussions each make Lamarque’s question still seem reasonable:
The particulars presented in a novel are *fictional*, and how can any view, however objective, of *fictional* particulars, give us truth? Ex hypothesi, it is not a view of the real world.\(^{29}\)

Ignoring the question of truth, which I put to rest in the last chapter, Lamarque’s question might appear to have renewed relevance after our discussion of panfictionalism and the make-believe theory. In both of these theories it is taken as granted that the fictive stance is by its nature a turning away from an appreciation reality. To be sure, this is a quite general tendency, one that should be familiar to anyone familiar with current theories of fiction; and the value of a discussion of panfictionalism and the make-believe theory lies in large part in how clearly they each give expression to this tendency. In a word, it is the tendency to treat the obvious claim that we bring literature under the fictive stance as amounting to the claim that literature therefore cannot offer “a view of the real world.” This is quite clearly assumed in the make-believe theory, for its entire theoretical enterprise can be seen as beginning with the acceptance of this and then going on to investigate the possibility of games of fantasy and imagination to explain how we involve ourselves with works of literary fiction. In the case of panfictionalism (or at least in the form in which it is thought to pose a threat), it is taken as granted that literature brings fictions and only fictions to view. But instead of accepting this and admitting that literature therefore is a game (and so less than properly serious), panfictionalists, quite rightly, feel a sting. For they realize that this invites the prejudice that texts subsumed under the fictive stance are ultimately frivolous, to be contrasted unfavorably with texts

\(^{29}\) Lamarque (1996), 105.
which call for the worldly stance and so an appreciation of reality. To take the sting out of this, panfictionalists set themselves the goal of showing that there is really no other stance than that of the fictive stance, that this is in effect the only stance available to one who really knows how to read aright. In both theories, the assumption is that since a work of literature presents fictions to view, the stance we takes towards it “ex hypothesi” cannot be open to “a view of the real world.” And the task for them then becomes one of showing that literature either offers make-believe worlds or that all we have in any case are fictional worlds — in neither case our world.

Simply put, the previous discussions each leave us with the idea that there is something amiss in the idea of applying both the fictive and worldly stance toward same textual content in the very same activity of appreciation. They each leave us with the idea that one stance by its nature excludes the other. And it is this residual feeling of incompatibility I want to address here. What we want is a sense of security in believing that the stance we take towards fictional content can be open to reality in the way the humanist requires it to be. If the previous discussion pulled these stances apart, we want the humanist to show us that it is intuitive to claim that they can go hand in hand. What I will do is to look outside of literature for a moment and bring to our attention the existence of other cultural practices that routinely draw on, indeed rest upon, the compatibility of these two stances. This will undermine the idea that the attitudes that define these stances are mutually antagonistic. And from here it will be a short step back to the humanist.
I will begin with a few words on thought experiments. Now the search for an adequate definition of thought experiment is as much of a field as is the search for a satisfactory definition of fiction: careers can be built on this alone. Since I want to make a very simple point, I will take the most generic and I think uncontroversial line in this debate — I do not want to get bogged-down in a discussion that will at best be of only marginal interest to theorists and philosophers of literature. In its broadest sense, a thought experiment is a particular employment of hypothetical reasoning, namely an investigation of factual reality that begins by asking “what if ‘...’” or “imagine that ‘...’” and proceeds to describe an invented scenario.\(^{30}\) A thought experiment is, in this expansive sense, the familiar practice of positing a scenario and asking how, given the particular way it teases and confronts some intuition or concept, it reflects back on the world and tells us something about our culture (or our scientific theories, the nature of our language, our moral system, etc). The common examples are well known. From the hard sciences we have the famous use of Schrödinger’s cat to refute the Copenhagen theory of quantum physics. In philosophy we have examples such as Socrates’ conversation with the Laws of Athens’s, Descartes’ Evil Genius, Wittgenstein’s so-called “beetle box” argument, and Nagel’s wondering what it would be like to be a bat. Rescher offers an interesting characterization of how these thought experiments work, one that gives us the initial point of contact with our discussion of fiction:

\(^{30}\) See Rescher (Horowitz and Massey (1991).
A “thought experiment” is an attempt to draw instruction from a process of hypothetical reasoning that proceeds by eliciting the consequence of an hypothesis which, for aught that one actually knows to the contrary, may well be false. It consists in reasoning from a supposition that is not accepted as true — perhaps even known to be false — but is assumed provisionally in the interest of making a point or resolving a conclusion.\textsuperscript{31}

In other words, thought experiments and literary fiction have at least this much in common: our attitude toward the scenarios described is that of the fictive stance — the claim that the hypothetical scenarios of thought experiments are “assumed” even when “known to be false” is philosopher-sprech for what in less lofty conversations we refer to as fictions. There are obviously many qualities which literature and thought experiment do not have in common (most noticeable among them is the fact that while thought experiments do, works of literary fiction do not, situate their fictions in a larger “process of hypothetical reasoning”).\textsuperscript{32} But they do share the use of fictions. If it is true, as it is often put, that the basic condition of the fictive stances is that it calls on the reader to treat a described scenario as “beyond truth-valuation”,\textsuperscript{33} that it assumes that “how things are is determined by how they are described in the text”\textsuperscript{34} (and not by world relations), a scenario in a thought experiment has at least the call to take the fictive stance toward its contents in common with literature.

\textsuperscript{31} Rescher (in Horowitz and Massey (1991), 31.

\textsuperscript{32} There has been a minor industry of papers published on the question of whether we can understand literature as thought experiment (See, for example, Edward Davenport, 1983). More reasonable is Eileen John’s understanding of what literary fiction has in common with thought experiment: “We can thus think of some works of fiction as functioning like philosophers’ thought experiments, in which problematic imagined cases are used to prompt responses relevant to philosophical problems and address questions about our conceptual scheme.” (John, 1998, 321)

\textsuperscript{33} Dolezel (1998), 5.

\textsuperscript{34} Lamarque and Olsen (1996), 99.
Now what does the parallel tell us? It is quite simple. If thought experiments can be seen as utilizing the basic ingredient of the fictive stance, we have an obvious model that reveals a basic compatibility between the worldly and the fictive stance — as simple as the parallel is, it effectively drains us of any feeling of antagonism. For when reading a thought experiment, we are asked (however we precisely want to explain this, and it will likely differ from example to example) to see the fictions presented as localizing a set of ‘real’ interests. We read Putnam’s ‘brain in the vat’ as calling into question various conceptions of human identity, through Descartes’ Evil Genius we are asked to see something about our notion of certainty, Socrates’ conversation with the Athenian Laws is read as also speaking about our — or at least the Athenians’ — laws. It is built into our concept of a thought experiment that it functions to instruct us about our world (we might recall here Wittgenstein’s famous line: “nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones35). In short, what we get from the thought experiment parallel is what we might call a model of openness, an example that gives the air of intuitiveness to the claim that we can, and do, think it possible that the frame of fiction can offer a window to the world. If this is so, we can see that something must be amiss when theorists argue, as Lamarque and Olsen do in their account of fiction, that:

Both fictive utterances and fictive reports create a gap between the content described and the actual world. The gap is primarily inferential; in presenting a

35 Wittgenstein (1980), 74e.
story, or reporting on it, *a speaker blocks inferences from fictional content to how things are in the world*.36

Indeed a gap is created, but only of the dull and obvious sort. Just as we do not fear the end of the world when we read *War of the Worlds*, we never cower when we read descriptions of Nozick’s ‘Utility Monster’ or Descartes’ Evil Genius. Questions of existence do not enter into our appreciation of fictions, and so there is a conceptual gap between the description of a fiction and the idea of its actuality. They are explicitly presented so that their descriptions can be entertained rather than brought under the categories of truth and reference. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we are not working through reality when working our way through textual content presented under the fictive stance, and the thought experiment parallel forces us to come to terms with this. The general idea we find in writings on literary fiction that the fictive stance necessarily excludes (or at least is by nature a turning away from) a worldly stance is not sustainable after we point out that it is done as a matter of daily endeavor in intellectual activities as common as philosophy and science.

Let us look at a quite different practice, one much more playful than we find in the ‘seriousness’ of thought experiments but just as interesting for our purposes. We might think, if we are not circumspect, that we have three and only three choices whenever we run into a proper name or personal pronoun: we can say that it refers to or stands for an *actual* particular, a *fictional* particular, or, failing to designate either, *nothing*. This sounds

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reasonable, but it misses another possibility. Try, if you believe that these are the only choices, to make sense of the refrain from Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes*:

*If old hymns you like, if bare limbs you like, if Mae West you like, or me undressed you like, why nobody will oppose — anything goes.*

Who is this “you” Cole Porter is singing about? If we think that it is a fictional particular we will run in great trouble. No proper *story* is told in this song and thus there is no narrative to give domicile to a genuinely fictional character: as real people live in real worlds, so fictional characters live in fictional worlds. If this “you” does not designate a proper fictional particular, then perhaps we should look for an actual particular, say *you*, the listener — singers, after all, do sing to their audiences. Though you are closer to the right answer, no strict sense can be made of this. If we literally thought the “you” picked out *you* the listener, we will run into the incontrovertible fact that Porter, long deceased, certainly could not have had *you* in mind when he wrote or sang the song. And it cannot be right, can it, to say that the song is about no one, nothing? Take another example, the chorus from *Lush Life*:

*I’ll forget you, I will, yet you are still burning inside my brain. Romance is mush, stifling those who strive. I’ll live a lush life in some small dive. And there I’ll be while I rot with the rest of those whose lives are lonely too.*

Now who is this “I”? When it was written by Billy Strayhorn he may very well have had someone in mind, perhaps himself (for surely songs can be autobiographical). But when Billie Holiday sings *Lush Life* I doubt she too is singing about Billy Strayhorn: her ‘I’ is not his ‘I’. Perhaps the “I” designates each singer of the song, switching residence with each person who offers his or her voice to it. But this cannot be, unless we
think singers are describing themselves when they perform. And that they do not is brought home as soon as Billie Holiday, quite female, goes on to sing *I'm Just a Gigolo*.

Let us take one more song, a few lines from the old Marlene Dietrich standard *La Vie en Rose*.

*And when you speak angels sing from above, and everyday words turn into love songs. Give your heart and soul to me, and life will always be la vie en rose.*

One wonderful thing about shamelessly romantic songs is that we know so well how to listen to them. There really is no challenge in identifying who the "you" is if we ask this as a cultural question rather than as a theoretical puzzle. We know, if we know anything at all about how to listen to music, that songs of these sorts are about everyone and yet no one at all, neither an actual nor fictional character but then still not about no one. That is to say, we do not take them to be about particular lovers. No argument is needed for this, for a few platitudes will suffice to make clear what is going on here. These songs are about every lover while speaking of no one lover at all. The "I" of *Lush Life* is the 'I' of the dejected lover: it is his song. The "you" in *La Vie En Rose* is the object of intoxicating love: this song is sung to her. There is nothing mysterious in this, as though we think that we now need to go on to investigate entities of some strange sort, say *The Dejected Lover As Such*. The songs have the role of describing what we might call characters of culture, "I-s" and "you-s" that draw together and hold in place general cultural narratives, namely our shared stories of love. We might say with slight hyperbole that the "I" of *Lush Life* is our form of life, that *La Vie en Rose* is the crooning of what our culture calls the moment of enthrallement.
Now if we turn these nebulous pronouns into genuine fictional particulars, giving them a name and a genuine narrative context, there is no reason to think that they will lose their ability to reflect our culture, that once we begin to treat them as fictions we somehow have to ignore their ability to frame aspects of general experience. When Rodolfo sings "O suave fanciulla" to Mimi, what would make us think that he cannot do, just because he lives in the fictional world of La Bohème, what the "you" in Anything Goes or La Vie en Rose does — that Puccini, in all of his effort, cannot accomplish what Cole Porter does with a much simpler song? And if it seems reasonable to step from Porter to Puccini, what plausible reason would we have for thinking that the step cannot be made from Puccini to Shakespeare, from Rodolfo and Mimi to Romeo and Juliet: from words that are sung to words that are written?

What these reflections remind us of — something we surely know, though we might forget it when under the grip of a certain theory of fiction — is that we have a general understanding that fictions can, and are used to, embody various regions of human experience. And we understand them to be able to cast back to us what we put into them, this culture of which both they and we are a part. This does not introduce a tension between the particularity of the fiction and the aspects of cultural life we take these characters to localize, for there is no obvious antagonism between the cultural and the 'un-real' aspects of a fiction. The fiction acts as a kind of linchpin. It holds together a

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37 We might recall the well-known claim of Jonathan Culler, "Fiction can hold together within a single space a variety of languages, levels of focus, points of view." (Culler, 1975, 261).
particular view of our world. But — we want to say — it is the particular, the fictional character, who is holding it together, essential rather than sacrificed in this act of opening our culture up to view. And it is part of understanding what a fiction is to treat them such, to respect, we might say, that it is Rodolfo, or Romeo, we are appreciating, but to allow ourselves to be open to what these characters have to show us. In short, far from there being a conceptual rift between the fictive and the worldly, their rapport is part of our idea of ways of using, and reading, fictions.

Indeed, we can find examples of literary works explicitly pleading for our openness. There was an interesting tradition in the history of the novel, one that seems to have vanished when modernism stepped onto the scene. It was the practice of prefacing a novel with a request, simply put, to take the fiction seriously. For example, Dostoevsky prefaces his *Notes from Underground* with the following:

> It goes without saying that both these Notes and their author are fictitious. Nevertheless, people like the author of these notes may, indeed must, exist in our society, if we think of the circumstances under which that society has been formed. It has been my wish to show the public a character of the recent past more clearly than is usually shown.

And as Dickens writes in his preface to *Oliver Twist*:

> It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life knows it to be so. Suggested to my mind long ago — long before I dealt in fiction — by what I often saw and read of, in actual life around me, I have, for years, tracked it through many profligate and noisome ways, and found it still the same. From the first introduction of that poor wench, to her laying her bloody head upon the robber's breast, there is not one word exaggerated or over-wrought. It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth. It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature; much of its ugliest hues, and some of its most
beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a
truth.

Though the tradition of calling for seriousness of appreciation is extinct, unless we
are beholden to a very silly theory, we will not think that this it is because we have finally
learned that literature is after all just play. The reason the tradition died is likely that we,
as a culture, have learned to take the novel seriously, that whereas there was once a
question about whether fictions could offer only diversion (and there still is, as we seem to
see in the make-believe theory), we have learned to read aright. What these authors are
denying is the appropriateness of a merely fictional stance; they are asking us not to read
their fictional stories as a sort imaginative reduplication of empirical discourse, a place
where we just find ‘facts’ stated about made-up people and events. And notice how clear
these authors are in what they want us to take seriously, how precise the plea is: that we
allow them to show us something about ourselves, our cultural reality, indeed “more
clearly than is usually shown.” There is no reason, as far as I can see, why we cannot take
them at their word. There is certainly no reason to think that something in the idea of
fiction precludes our taking this stance toward their work.

The fear, I would think, is that in calling on this openness we might fall into an old
trap, that of crushing the fictive stance under the weight of the worldly stance. Certainly
some forms of humanism fall into this trap, namely mimetic or representational varieties:
any humanism that wants to claim that the connection between literature and the our-
worldly is fundamentally a matter of fiction ‘mirroring’ the real world. Once we say this,
and go on to ask that we appreciate in fictions that of which they are a representation (the
actual world, the real prototype of which the fiction is a symbol, etc.), we do sacrifice the
fictive stance, allowing room, in effect, only for the worldly stance. This is a violence to the idea of the literary, and a very cheap route to humanism, one that ultimately tries to make literature relevant to the our-worldly by denying that there is really any fiction in literature. I have given arguments throughout this thesis that make clear how far from this sort of theory our humanist stands. We do not want to cancel the fictive stance in calling on this openness to the worldly stance; and we avoid this mistake by giving up the notion that the connection to external reality comes in the form of a mimetic duplication of the actual world.

Rather, we argue, as our humanist has, that in the construction of their worlds, works of literary fiction can bring the structure of ours into view, that the connection lies in the shared fabric out of which both our cultural reality and fictional worlds are woven. The worldly stance does not call on us to try, impossibly and foolishly, to deny Othello's fictionality and try to turn him into a mirror image of our world (say the Jealous Man — whatever you will). He represents nothing real. But we see in him our standards of representation, our criteria, our sense-bestowing linguistic and social practices, practices that flow through any world that is intelligible to us (it is always important to remind ourselves how much is implied by the simple fact that fiction is intelligible to us). To bring literature under the fictive stance is to allow the worlds it describes to be free from the actual world. To add to this the worldly stance is to allow these thoroughly fictional worlds to bring to view what they take from us in their creation. In short, what the humanist has argued is that we do not take a fictional world in any way to be a picture of our world; we rather show that in fictions we see this shared stage, this undercurrent of common reality, indeed often "more clearly than is usually shown." I could rehearse my
theory in detail at this point. But besides being tedious, it is unnecessary: I have made my case for this already. Instead, I will close with a quotation from Bernard Harrison, who says very succinctly much of what I have wanted to say in this thesis:

The textuality which constitutes Mr. Ramsey's personality is, then, not a textuality of words alone, but a textuality of practices. And since we share those practices, and are also in part constituted as individuals by them, the practices out of which Mr. Ramsey is constructed link him not merely to the reality of the world present to all of us as the condition of our speaking a common language, but to the reality which we constitute: to us, as readers.  

38 Harrison (1993), 42.
I trust that I have summed up my argument for humanism frequently enough in the past chapters that I needn’t do so again here. So in conclusion I will just offer a few brief words about what I think most recommends the approach I have taken in this essay. There are three features of my argument I would like to draw attention to, each of which I think brings into full light what I have tried to achieve here.

I would think that the crucial advantage of the approach to humanism I have recommended is that it shows us that we needn’t fear that we will loose touch with the literary if we embrace the humanist intuition. The distrust many have of humanism is that it often seems that becoming humanists is tantamount to renouncing our promise to say something informative of the nature of literary involvement. We saw this clearly in our criticisms of the indirect and truth-seeking approaches to humanism, forms of humanism that bring to light the ease with which the humanist can let the literary work slip away in his attempt to unite it with reality. What I hope to have shown is that it is possible to offer a theory of humanism that does not fall into this trap. The theory of humanism I have offered in this thesis shows us that we can be both humanists and faithful literary theorists. It reveals the connection between literature and life to be a proper feature of literary content, a value we come into contact with when we examine the interior of the literary work of art. And if this is so, it offers us a way of seeing that a properly developed theory
of humanism can bring us closer to rather than turn us away from the nature of literary experience.

In showing this we also saw that we must fully give up a traditional humanistic strategy for making the passage from literature to life, namely that of relying on a mimetic theory of literary fiction. The urge to invent a theory of mimesis for translating fictions into actualities is great for the humanist, and anyone who has been drawn to a defense of humanism has at one time or other felt its pull. If we try to turn fictions into reflections of actuality, there is no trouble in making literature relevant to our world, for as soon as we open a novel we find that we are already there — indeed we find that literature never offers an occasion to leave this world. But as we have seen, this is also the most unreasonable route to humanism. In what can be read as an indictment of this traditional humanistic strategy, Dolezel writes that

Mimetic doctrine is behind a very popular mode of reading that converts fictional persons into live people, imaginary settings into actual places, invented stories into real-life happenings. Mimetic reading, practiced by naïve readers and reinforced by journalistic critics, is one of the most reductive operations of which the human mind is capable: the vast, open, and inviting universe of fictional discourse is shrunk to the model of one single world, actual human experience.¹

Much of the value of the sceptic in this thesis was to force the humanist to avoid this single-world model of fiction. In taking the sceptic seriously, we found a way to offer a theory of humanism that can without qualification accept the fact that literature trades in the construction of fictional worlds rather than in the building of mirrors held up to the

¹ Dolezel (1998), iv.
actual world. We saw, in short, that we can maintain a connection between literature and reality without resting humanism on a foundation of representationalism. And this shows us that it is possible to offer a theory of humanism that is compatible with 'strong' theories of fictional discourse, and so one that can sit well with and be of use to the great number of current theories of literature that take as their staring point a rejection of representational and mimetic models of fiction.

To offer one final reflection, I hope that I have also made it clear that in becoming humanists we need not fear that we will be forced to accept a conservative view of literature, one which drains literature of its critical force. The harshest criticism of this essay was brought against the charge that if we say that literature brings reality to view, then we will not be able to move beyond the idea that literature can only offer us idle visions of a world we already well know. If we can say that literature is able to trace and give testament to the way our world is, I hope to have shown that this will entitle us to claim that it can reveal this world in a light that is sufficiently brilliant to shock us out of our in varying degrees superficial grasps of it. If we claim, as I have, that literature functions to close the gap between mind and world, we unite in one move the acculturating and critical power of literature. In short, I hope to have shown that embracing humanism can lead us towards an adequate understanding of the social and cognitive force of literature, one which shows us that we are not misguided in giving fiction as high of a place in our culture as we do.

Perhaps this is a case where a plea might be strengthened by weakening it. I would like to think that I have made the theory of humanism offered in this thesis both plausible
and attractive. In a word, I hope that one thinks that it works and that I have shown that we should want it to work. But, if I have failed to convince one of this, perhaps it would be just as satisfying to think that I have made it appear both plausible and attractive to want to be humanists at all. Even if one is not sold on the precise shape in which I am selling humanism, I would be content if I have given the reader a sense of how interesting and important it is to ask the questions raised here, and that both philosophy and literary theory will benefit from it.


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