

Peter Lamarque

The High Price of Evading Boredom: A Reply to Erik Bjerck Hagen

Erik Bjerck Hagen, in "The High Price of Evading Truth",¹ a critical review of *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (TFL),² by Stein Haugom Olsen and myself, offers a thoughtful critique of the book which, although in fundamental disagreement with its main themes, picks out key points of debate and engages them in an open-minded and good-humoured spirit. In defending our position I hope to reciprocate this generosity of spirit.

Perhaps the most telling passage in the critical review is where Bjerck Hagen lists the reasons why, in contrast to Haugom Olsen and myself, he prefers to go on talking about the "truth of literature": it is part of a strategy, as he puts it, to avoid "the boredom that lurks everywhere". For Bjerck Hagen it is simply more exciting to take a pro-truth line, partly because (so he suggests) the no-truth position of TFL is pretty easy to defend and partly because everyone else in the game is a no-truth theorist (he lists the New Critics, the Structuralists, the New Historicists, the deconstructionists). There is no denying something stylish in this refusal to follow fashion and in the defence of a philosophical view because the alternatives are boring, but it is curious nonetheless, at least in this instance. For one thing, Haugom Olsen and I are at pains in TFL to distance our version of the no-truth position from that of all the people he lists, who tend to be either formalists,

¹ Nordisk estetisk tidskrift 17, 1998.

² Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994

relativists, or anti-humanists. It would hardly be accurate to see us as part of a bandwagon. Furthermore, among our principal constituency for the book, analytical philosophers and aestheticians, it is the *pro-truth* stance that is the orthodoxy. In that company being a no-truth defender looks daring and out of line. The main philosophical contributors to the debate – Martha Nussbaum, David Novitz, Colin Falck, Gordon Graham, et al. – are all pro-truth and the main thrust of the reviews of TFL in philosophical journals has been to attack its no-truth stance.

But Bjerck Hagen's boredom argument goes deeper than this for his central objection is that literary aesthetics, as exemplified by TFL, diminishes literature and makes literary criticism dull and narrow. This worry runs through his comments, both about fiction, where he criticizes us for too sharp a demarcation of the fictional and the factual and about literature where he suggests we are too hidebound in delimiting literary appreciation. There are a number of responses to this line of thought.

The first is that it rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of the project. Haugom Olsen and I are not aiming to be *prescriptive* in our accounts of fiction and literature. We are not recommending a new conception of the field or proposing a revolution in literary studies. We are simply trying to analyse a longstanding and recognizable practice. In the case of literature we are trying to identify, as precisely as the subject allows, what literary appreciation is, in contrast to other kinds of appreciation, to describe what it is to reflect on a work from a literary point of view (in our own words, to adopt a literary stance on a work). It was never our intention to rule out other ways of reading, or enjoying, literary works, including any approach which might relieve Bjerck Hagen of his boredom. Historians, philosophers, cultural theorists, biographers, psychologists, those seeking escape or fantasy, all have a legitimate interest in the great canonical texts – the texts are there for all to study and enjoy. Anyone can do anything they like with them! But why should we assume that all such interests should be assimilated into a broad baggy conception of *literary criticism*? Rather than being of

service to literary criticism, this indiscriminating inclusiveness only threatens to destroy it. If there is no distinctive literary interest in literary works, then there is no distinctive literary criticism and ultimately there are no works of literature either. Of course there are those who would welcome these nihilistic consequences. But they tend not to be literary critics and it is they, not us, who are at odds with the bulk of readers; it is they, not us, who are seeking to change the subject. You don't make literary criticism less boring by changing it into something other than literary criticism.

Bjerck Hagen has worries about the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, objecting that we "assume without much argument that fictional utterances always and under all circumstances are distinguishable from non-fictional ones". As we spend at least three chapters offering a detailed characterisation of the distinction it is not quite fair to say that we "assume" it "without much argument". In fact we spend a great deal of time showing that more traditional ways of distinguishing fiction from non-fiction are inadequate: notably formalistic and semantic accounts. Perhaps surprisingly, we show that the distinction that matters in literary studies is a distinction between types of utterances, not a distinction between fiction and fact or between truth and falsity. Thus a fact-based description could turn out to be the content of a fictive utterance and a literal truth an instance of fiction. This makes for a powerful and flexible notion of the fictional which neatly sidelines worries about "corresponding with the facts" and makes fictionality more like a contract between story-teller and reader. The key term is "utterance" for an utterance is not simply a sentence (or a fragment of a text) but a sentence-in-use. One and the same sentence (type) could be used in different utterances to different purposes: indeed now as fictional now as non-fictional. So when Bjerck Hagen states (in apparent contradiction to our view) that "*every* non-fictional text can be regarded as a fictional text" he is at cross purposes with us in at least two respects: first, because we explicitly reject the idea that *texts* are fictional or nonfictional; and second, because at a textual (i.e. sentential) level, it is indeed possible to adopt a fictive or non-fictive

stance at will. Those who adopt a fictive stance to, say, the Bible are simply reading the text as if it were a fictive utterance; this is not only possible but might, in Bjerck Hagen's terms, be "fruitful" as well. However, it is a further question whether the Bible *is* a fiction. That, we argue, is not a matter of its truth or falsehood, or a matter of the attitude adopted by its readers, but rests on the intentions of its authors (specifically whether they intended it to be read in one way or another).

Bjerck Hagen finds this appeal to intentions suspect. He claims "we have no access to textual intention apart from an interpretation of the texts we read" and that when Haugom Olsen and I appeal to intentions we must be relying tacitly on E D Hirsch's distinction between *meaning* and *significance*. Again, though, this seems to be a misunderstanding on both counts. For one thing it is not "textual intentions" (one thinks of Umberto Eco's *intentio operis*) that are at issue in determining fictional status but the actual historical intentions of a historical story-teller. In the majority of cases whether a work is meant to be fictional or not is a straightforward, readily accessible, matter of fact. No doubt there are cases where the historical fact is not clear (it is surprisingly difficult to find convincing examples) but then one must simply fall back on a principle of charity and adopt the stance to the work that brings out the best in it. But none of this has anything to do with Hirsch's distinction between *meaning* and *significance*, nor even with interpretation. Whether a work is fiction or non-fiction has nothing to do with its meaning – certainly not in Hirsch's sense – but is to do with its status or, in Kendall Walton's terms, the "category" to which it belongs. Determining the status or category of a work is a pre-condition of interpretation, not a stage within interpretation. Nor, when it comes to interpretation are Haugom Olsen and I committed to simple intentionalism: neither of us is a Hirschian. However, when Bjerck Hagen goes on to say that "great works of fiction often discuss the use of their own fictionality", we would be happy to agree. But that claim belongs squarely in the realm of interpretation, and goes beyond the level of status. The distinction between the fictional and the real is a

not unfamiliar theme in literary works (think of Shakespeare's use of the play within the play – to take only the most obvious example) but that fact poses no special problem for fictionality or for distinguishing fiction from non-fiction.

Bjerck Hagen objects to what he sees as a sharp line round literary aesthetics. But the way he puts his objection is puzzling: "What is the use of L&O's literary aesthetics if they do not allow for new and possible combinations, but instead restrict themselves to what is *necessarily* true?" At several points he chides us for being tied to *necessities*. Yet what is at issue here? Is it about the very status of our enquiry? But to the extent that the enquiry is conceptual it will perforce deal in necessities rather than contingencies: that is the nature of conceptual truths. Yet the matter is complicated because in this case the conceptual truths are defined within a practice and the existence (and nature) of a human practice always rests on historical and cultural contingencies. It is not a necessary truth that humans have literary works or an institution of literature but given that they have there are likely to be necessary truths governing conceptual relations within the practice. In exploring the practice we have aimed to uncover some of the conceptual necessities. This all becomes relevant when we find ourselves addressing essentialist claims about literature made by those with whom we are debating. Thus a common essentialist claim (in the pro-truth camp) is that the value of literary works is vested in their human truth, in other words that there is a *necessary* relation between literary value and truth. In opposition to this claim, we argue that while it is essential to literary value that a work explores and develops themes of human interest it is not an essential part of literary appreciation to debate the worldly truth of thematic statements or to ground literary judgments on the truth or falsity of implied propositions. Truth assessments of this kind belong in philosophy or theology or the social sciences. Inevitably this debate – meeting one essentialist claim with another – takes us into the realm of necessities. In the very first chapter we make it plain that we are not rejecting or questioning the large number of *contingent* relations between literary works and truth (we spell them out on pp.4-5) and I wonder if

this is where Bjerck Hagen has misunderstood the line of argument. Literary critics might well have an interest in the moral, political, or philosophical subject matter of literary works and, who knows, might chat about such things in the senior common room. It doesn't follow that by extending their discussions in this way – deliberating on what is true or false in the moral sphere – they are still doing literary criticism, or making literary judgments, any more than it follows that Martha Nussbaum is doing literary criticism when she cites passages from Henry James as part of an argument in moral philosophy. Haugom Olsen and I are not telling people they should stop talking like this or not cross disciplinary boundaries – we are only trying to find an appropriate delimitation of discourses. It is in no-one's interests – certainly not that of literary critics – to blur all such modes of speaking and assume that criteria of judgment and value are always undifferentiated.

Likewise, when Bjerck Hagen finds he cannot help reflecting on the truth or falsity of the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, as well as seeing it as a thematic focus, we have no reason to criticize him. Literary works are full of sentences which are open to truth-assessment and it is inevitable that readers will test them against their beliefs. The question is to what extent this response – weighing truth – is *integral* to literary appreciation, an essential criterion of literary judgment (as it is essential to philosophical judgment). Our claim is that it is not necessary. It is difficult to avoid talking of necessity here for the claim that *sometimes* in *some* literary works *some* readers take an interest in truth assessment, although no doubt true, is too banal a contingency to be worth debating.

On the question of reference in relation to fiction, I suspect we are not in deep disagreement with Bjerck Hagen. He, like us, holds that literary works can genuinely denote and he makes some interesting suggestions on the relation between correspondence and coherence. I am sorry, however, we have not persuaded him of the merits of emphasising *aboutness* in the literary context over that of reference. The point of saying that "X is about Y" is that it can subsume certain species of reference but also goes well beyond reference. The prime case is

thematic aboutness, which is at the centre of our account of literature. To say that a work is (thematically) about pride or prejudice or sense or sensibility is not to say that the work *refers* to these things but that they provide a focus for an interpretation of the work. And to follow Monroe Beardsley – as Bjerck Hagen recommends – in inferring that because a novel is “about James Bond” it thereby “refers to James Bond” is only to court confusion.

Finally, he is probably right that we are a bit harsh on Hayden White comparing his “post-modernist view of history” to that of Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the political implications of playing fast and loose with truth. Those who see truth as just an ideological construct or a product of discourses would do well to reflect again on the predicament of Winston Smith. In a world where truth all too easily gets distorted by rhetoric or the desire to rewrite history (Holocaust denial being an obvious example), the post-modernist view (in its extreme manifestations) takes on a seriousness beyond just another move in the metaphysical game. Nor does Bjerck Hagen’s appeal to a distinction between “brute facts” and “interpreted facts” get the post-modernists off the hook. This distinction is neither clear nor widely supported. No anti-foundationalist could accept it (for Goodman, for example, interpretation “goes all the way down”) nor could those, like Davidson, who reject the scheme/content distinction. The history of logical empiricism is strewn with failed attempts to find convincing examples of brute facts.

So back to boredom. Does literary criticism come out looking boring from the perspective of literary aesthetics? But that’s the wrong question. Adopting the literary stance to a work is only as rewarding as the work itself. Perhaps critics have been led to theory because they have grown tired of the literary works they study. That would be a pity. But the majority of readers can return to the great works and be refreshed by them without abandoning the idea that they are works of art to be appreciated as such. To give up the literary stance on literature would be equivalent to giving up the aesthetic appreciation of

art. But that would be to give up art itself. Too high a price surely for the relief of boredom.