

NARRATIVE THICKNESS

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the experience of a literary narrative qua literary narrative is an experience of narrative thickness, that is, an experience in which narrative form and narrative content are inseparable. I explain my thesis of poetic thickness in § 1, showing why it does not admit of extension from poetry to literary narratives. §§ 2–3 synthesize the work of Derek Attridge and Peter Lamarque, advancing narrative thickness as a necessary condition of literary narratives. I propose a work of didactic literature – J. M. Coetzee’s ‘The Lives of Animals’ – as a paradigmatic counter-example to narrative thickness in § 4. I show, in § 5, that narrative thickness holds for this work in particular and didactic works which are literary in general, concluding that narrative thickness is indeed a necessary condition of literary narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

Plato¹ distinguished the ‘style’ of stories from their ‘content’ and while there has been philosophical interest in the relationship between form and content ever since, A. C. Bradley’s ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’ lecture marks the beginning of the contemporary concern.² In ‘Poetic Thickness’,³ I developed Bradley’s largely unsubstantiated argument for form-content inseparability in the light of subsequent work by I. A. Richards⁴ and Peter Lamarque.⁵ I advanced a reciprocal relationship between form and content, which I called *poetic thickness* and defined as follows:

the inseparability of poetic form and poetic content in the experience of a work of poetry such that neither form nor content can be isolated without loss of work identity. Poetic thickness is a demand which is satisfied by a work rather than a property of a text, and is characteristic of poetry such that if a work is a work of poetry, it will reward the demand for poetic thickness.⁶

My thesis employed Lamarque’s definition of poetic content as ‘*the subject-as-realised-in-the-poem*’ and poetic form as ‘*the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-in-the-poem*’.⁷ I began with Bradley’s conception of form-content

¹ Plato, *Republic*, 392c5–7.

² A. C. Bradley, ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 3–34.

³ Rafe McGregor, ‘Poetic Thickness’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (2014): 49–64.

⁴ I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1930) and *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁵ Peter Lamarque, ‘The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning’, *Ratio* 22 (2009): 398–420.

⁶ McGregor, ‘Poetic Thickness’, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

inseparability as ‘resonant meaning’ and then presented several examples to demonstrate the reciprocal influence of sound (form) on meaning (content).⁸ My final move was to appropriate Lamarque’s reconceptualization of resonant meaning as a demand rather than a property, which is consistent with Bradley’s concern with the value of poetry. I shall take form-content inseparability in poetry to have been sufficiently well-established and examine whether poetic thickness can be extended beyond poetry to non-poetic literature.

The oldest categories of literary art are poems and plays. Both have ancient origins, arising from an oral tradition where they were performed for audiences. While contemporary appreciators are much more likely to read a printed poem than hear a spoken one, performance has remained essential to plays. The third category of literature is the novel, which includes (shorter) novellas and (even shorter) short stories. Unlike its predecessors, the novel has a weaker link to performance such that to read a novel in silence and solitude is not to have an impoverished experience of the work. The prototype novels of the Enlightenment were also distinguished by being modelled on history and biography rather than on poetry or plays. I restricted my thesis to poetry, but Bradley twice extends his proposal to all art and thus to plays and novels.⁹ There are, however, at least two reasons to resist employing resonant meaning beyond poetry. One is the greater emphasis on sound and non-literal meaning in poetry. Nigel Fabb states:

(1) Poetry is formally rich: it is associated with the regulation of many forms at the same time – for example, not only metre, but also rhyme, and perhaps optional alliteration, and a bit of parallelism.¹⁰

(2) Poetry is more difficult to interpret than prose, because it is more ambiguous, less direct and more open to figurative language such as metaphor, or just less easy to understand in general.¹¹

Another reason is that the formal features of plays and novels typically differ from those of poems such that the form of the former pair cannot be explained in the same terms as the form of the latter. These formal aspects are, I propose, those in virtue of which plays and novels are narratives.¹²

I shall employ *narrative* as synonymous with ‘story’, as a particular type of representation of a sequence of events. Hayden White identifies three types of

⁸ Ibid., 53–55.

⁹ Bradley, ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’, 15, 25.

¹⁰ Nigel Fabb, ‘Why Is Verse Poetry?’, *PN Review* 36 (2009): 55–56.

¹¹ Ibid., 56.

¹² Although I lack the space to discuss either, I am not suggesting: (i) that all plays and all novels are narratives or (ii) that poetry and narrative are exclusive categories such that poetic thickness will not hold for a narrative poem.

historical representation – annals, chronicles, and histories – and claims that the first two lack narrativity. He maintains that non-narrative historians such as Alexis de Toqueville, Jacob Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga, and Fernand Braudel ‘did not impose upon [the perceived reality] the form of a story’,¹³ and explains the distinctions between the three historiographies. Peter Goldie adds diaries to the category of representations which ‘fall short of a fully fledged narrative’.¹⁴ White’s discussion reveals at least two significant differences between non-narrative and narrative representations, the first of which is an absence of what Goldie refers to as *coherence*, that is, causal and other connections in the represented sequence of events.¹⁵ A second difference is that non-narrative representations lack *closure*, which White describes as ‘that summing up of the “meaning” of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from the well-made story’.¹⁶ White’s description matches Goldie’s observations on the characteristic features of narratives that take human beings as their subject: they are not only coherent but also meaningful, and have evaluative and emotional import, that is, they offer the narrator’s judgement of – and emotional response to – the represented sequence of events.¹⁷ Both coherence and closure can be subsumed under the concept of *plot*, which is ‘a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole’.¹⁸ I shall designate plot as the feature that distinguishes narrative from non-narrative representations of sequences of events.¹⁹

My interest is in narratives that are works of literature. My view of what constitutes literature follows the combination of ‘*the intention to invoke a literary response*’ on the part of the author and the adoption of the ‘*literary stance*’ on the part of the reader, as set out by Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen.²⁰ My argument does not, however, require that this theory be accepted as a premise and I shall draw all my examples from the literary canon.²¹ My argument does

¹³ Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 6.

¹⁴ Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ White, ‘Value of Narrativity’, 20.

¹⁷ Goldie, *Mess Inside*, 22–25.

¹⁸ White, ‘Value of Narrativity’, 13.

¹⁹ White actually maintains that an annal has a plot due to the structure provided by the listing of the years (*ibid.*, 13), but I consider both coherence and closure necessary for plot.

²⁰ Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 256.

²¹ Membership of the canon is of course itself disputed, but the canon remains the most reliable guide to literary value available.

require that despite the significance of the differences between fiction and literature, fictionality is characteristic of literature, that – in Lamarque and Olsen’s terms – ‘literature for the most part consists of stories that are either invented by the author or are mythical or legendary in character.’²² Derek Attridge indicates his broad agreement with this classification when he claims that while *Middlemarch* can be read as fiction but not literature, it is ‘unlikely’ that it could be read as literature but not fiction.²³ I shall take this to be true of the relationship between literary narratives and fictional narratives such that literary narratives are works of fiction, literature, and narrative. In the remainder of this article, I shall employ ‘narrative’ to mean ‘literary narrative’ unless otherwise specified.

II. STAGING

Attridge is explicitly sceptical of the ‘tradition of “organic form”’, due to its reliance upon the combination of two separate elements.²⁴ His alternative is a particularly intimate relationship between literary form and literary content, where content is *constitutive* of form: ‘Meaning is not therefore something that appears in defining opposition or complementary apposition to form, but as something already taken up within form; forms are made out of meanings quite as much as they are made out of sounds and shapes.’²⁵ One of Bradley’s claims in his lecture is: ‘This unity has, if you like, various “aspects” or “sides,” but they are not factors or parts; if you try to examine one, you find it is also the other.’²⁶ This could be interpreted as a claim of constitution rather than inseparability, but neither Bradley nor Attridge appears to mean ‘constitution’ in the strict philosophical sense. In David Wiggins’s classic example of the coincident-objects explanation of material constitution, the tree *T* is constituted by *W*, the aggregate of its cellulose molecules at a particular time.²⁷ *T* can change while *W* remains the same (if the tree is cut up in such a way so as not to damage any cells) and *W* can change while *T* remains the same (when the tree is pruned). *T* and *W* thus co-exist spatially and temporally. The relationship between *T* and *W* is clearly different from that between form and meaning because meaning cannot be altered without a corresponding change in form – a symmetry I discuss below. One of Attridge’s main concerns is the relationship between the institution of literature (as opposed to individual literary works) and ethical responsibility. This concern manifests itself in a defence of literary form against

²² Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, 268.

²³ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁶ Bradley, ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’, 15.

²⁷ David Wiggins, ‘On Being in the Same Place at the Same Time’, *Philosophical Review* 77 (1968): 90.

accusations of insignificance in comparison with ethics, and his rejection of the form-content opposition is in service of this end.²⁸ If one sets this issue aside, however, it is perfectly plausible to consider Attridge's *staging* as a thesis of form-content *inseparability* in literary works, as I shall demonstrate.

Attridge begins his re-elaboration of literary form by advancing the work as 'an act-event' or 'performance'.²⁹ A performance should be understood as a particular reading of a particular work by a particular individual rather than a performance in terms of acting or reading aloud, and is thus not dissimilar to Bradley's focus on the experience of the poem.³⁰ The work (act-event) of literature is constituted by responsiveness to its singularity. Singularity 'is a uniqueness derived from a capacity to be endlessly transformed while remaining identifiable – within the institutional norms – as what it is'.³¹ Singularity is based on the paradox Jacques Derrida³² identifies in the signature: the signature is both unique (the legal system recognizes an individual's signature to represent that individual alone), but also repeated and – on each repetition – slightly different (no two signings will be exactly the same). The signature thus represents not only an individual entity, but also an act of signing by that individual, which has a context (time and place). Similarly, the literary work (as experience) is both the same (in its created uniqueness) and different (because no two readings – even by the same person – will be exactly the same). Singularity also describes the way in which literary works are characterized by the potential for interpretation and reinterpretation.³³

Singularity, Attridge argues, is a necessary characteristic of literature and is linked to both literary form and literary value: 'Responding to the work as literary means responding to the singularity of its meaningful, affective moment, occurring in the renewable act of my performance; what it does not mean is carrying away from the text some conceptual substance for my further use or

²⁸ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 108.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Attridge holds that a poem, play, or novel is a *potential* literary work which is only realized as a literary work in the act-event of reader or listener engagement with the poem, play, or novel. There is thus a sense in which each reading generates a unique literary work, but there is also a sense in which the potential literary work places normative constraints on the act-event, that is, the engagement must be appropriate in order for the realization to take place (*ibid.*, 58–59). Both Bradley and Attridge therefore identify the work with the experience of the work; Bradley's emphasis is on the author's creation and Attridge's on the reader's or listener's response.

³¹ Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.

³² Jacques Derrida, 'From Signsponge', trans. Richard Rand, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 359–61.

³³ Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee*, 10.

entertainment.³⁴ Like Bradley, Attridge is distinguishing the value of literature qua literature from any instrumental value that a literary work may have. This passage is an explicit statement of form-content inseparability as the substance cannot be removed from the work (the combination of substance and style). Attridge also shares Bradley's concern with resonant meaning, and claims that words are composed of sounds and shapes: 'these sounds and shapes are nexuses of meaning and feeling, and hence deeply rooted in culture, history, and the varieties of human experience. The formal sequence therefore functions as a *staging* of meaning and feeling.'³⁵ Staging is realized in 'performative reading',³⁶ an experience of the work that activates its linguistic power and involves the simultaneous experience of its conceptual, emotional, and physical qualities.³⁷ Staging is essential to appreciating literature and is in fact the source of the pleasure taken in literature qua literature.³⁸ Like form-content inseparability for Bradley, staging is the criterion for the literary, and a work is defined as literary if it is 'open to such a staging of the primary functions of language and discourse'.³⁹

Just as a director stages a play, so literary form stages literary content and staging is the means by which form is re-elaborated such that it is (partly) constituted by content. While Attridge rejects form-content unity in favour of constitution, the constitution relation is – unlike identity – asymmetrical, so if content constitutes form, form does not constitute content. It is not only substance that cannot be removed from a work without loss of identity for Attridge, however, since formal features are apprehended as '*already meaningful*'.⁴⁰ He states: 'The sounds and shapes of the text are always already meaningful sounds and shapes, and there is no moment, not even a theoretical one, at which it is possible to isolate a purely formal property – at least not without turning the literary work into something else.'⁴¹ When one does isolate a formal property of the work, one therefore moves outside the literary act-event and is no longer discussing the work, in the same way that poetic form and poetic content in isolation are no longer the poetic work for Bradley. The relationship proposed by both Attridge and Bradley is symmetrical – neither content nor form can be

³⁴ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110. Like Bradley on the relationship between resonant meaning and poetry, as I discussed previously (McGregor, 'Poetic Thickness', 58), it is not clear whether Attridge is proposing that staging is a sufficient condition or a necessary and sufficient condition for literature.

⁴⁰ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

isolated without loss of identity – and thus more accurately characterized as inseparability than constitution.

There is further evidence of staging as an inseparability relation in the claim that staging

includes the mobilization of meanings, or rather of the events of meaning: their sequentiality, interplay, and changing intensity, their patterns of expectation and satisfaction or tension and release, their precision or diffuseness. It does not include any extractable sense, information, image, or referent that the work lays before the reader. Through this mobilization of meanings, the work's linguistic operations such as referentiality, metaphoricality, intentionality, and ethicity are staged.⁴²

Staging as the *mobilization of meanings* – or *forming of content* – matches Bradley's resonant meaning very closely, especially Lamarque's characterization of the latter: 'neither can be specified or identified independently of the other. In this sense form and content are united, indivisible and mutually dependent.'⁴³ Attridge and Bradley are both concerned with the experience of the literary work, the close relation of sound and meaning in this experience, and its final value. I shall henceforth take staging to describe the relation of form-content inseparability in literary works, once again understood as a demand imposed upon a work rather than discovered therein.⁴⁴ If staging functions as a necessary condition for literature in general, then Attridge's theory indicates how Bradley's thesis of form-content inseparability can be manipulated to extend beyond poetry. I shall now explain the operation of staging in literary narratives in particular by means of Lamarque's work on narrative opacity.

III. OPACITY

Lamarque identifies the type of narratives which are opaque as follows:

Only where the mode of narration is salient – in other words where the form in which a story is told matters in the appraisal of the narrative – will co-referential substitutions be blocked. Those narratives primarily concerned with imparting information – from homely conversational narratives to those of history or biography – will normally invite a transparent construal of their proper names and other referential devices.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid., 109. I do not have space to discuss Attridge's conception of *ethicity* in this paper.

⁴³ Lamarque, 'Poetic Meaning', 409.

⁴⁴ Attridge's conception of staging is compatible with both (i) the relation of inseparability rather than constitution and (ii) this relation being a demand rather than a discovery, especially when one considers that staging is realized in performative reading.

⁴⁵ Peter Lamarque, *The Opacity of Narrative* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 146. The initial discussion of narrative opacity is by Lamarque and Olsen, who use the examples of 'London' in the Sherlock Holmes stories, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and Dickens's *Bleak House* (*Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, 80–82) and 'Canterbury' in *The Canterbury Tales* (p. 126–28).

The mention of the salience of the mode of narration recalls Attridge's argument: 'What we respond to in performing a literary work is evidently a complex involving both the formal and the semantic.'⁴⁶ Narrative opacity is distinct from, but related to, W.V.O. Quine's referential opacity. Quine identifies several referentially opaque contexts, where the truth of a sentence depends upon something other than the referent such that truth is not preserved in co-referential substitutions. For example, although 'Tegucigalpa' and 'the capital of Honduras' have the same referent, co-referential substitution transforms true statement (1) into false statement (2):

(1) 'Philip believes that Tegucigalpa is in Nicaragua.'⁴⁷

(2) 'Philip believes that the capital of Honduras is in Nicaragua.'⁴⁸

Narrative opacity is not concerned with the preservation of truth, but with the preservation of the identity of the fictional work, specifically with the constraints it places on one's imaginative engagement with that work. Lamarque's discussion of narrative opacity in terms of the relation between form and content focuses on the issue of paraphrase, about which I shall have more to say below, but he is explicit that 'narrative opacity also shows how form helps determine content in prose narrative.'⁴⁹ Content is always shaped by form in a literary narrative such that the narrative is not transparent, that is, one does not penetrate through the form straight to the content as one would in a philosophical or historical work.

Narrative content is therefore 'not merely loosely or contingently connected to its mode of presentation, but is partially constituted by it.'⁵⁰ People, places, and events thus appear under a description, which constitutes a perspective on them. The perspectival description of a fictional setting such as Coketown in Dickens's *Hard Times* is paradigmatic form-content unity because the content, the town, is shaped by the form, the point of view from which it is presented, such that the content is not separable from the form-content unity which constitutes the work. This is true of all narratives where the mode of narration is salient, including those that employ real rather than fictional people, places, or events. Numerous parts of London, for example, are described in great detail in *Oliver Twist*, but because the form in which the story is told matters in the appraisal of

⁴⁶ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 108.

⁴⁷ W. V. O. Quine, 'Reference and Modality', in *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1961), 141.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lamarque, *Opacity of Narrative*, 154.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

the narrative the geographical content is not presented transparently.⁵¹ The lack of transparency means one cannot invoke just any information about London in one's imaginative engagement with the novel if the identity of the work is to be preserved. For example, *Oliver Twist* does not authorize one to substitute 'the city that hosted the 2012 Summer Olympics' for 'London'. 'London' refers to London, but 'London' is presented under an aspect rather than in its full extension. 'London' in *Oliver Twist* is not therefore London per se (that is, 'London' in its fully extensional use), but *London-in-Oliver-Twist* (that is, London under the aspect *Oliver Twist* licenses one to imagine). Lamarque states:

the content of literary fictional narrative is infused with a kind of opacity. The content is given and thus constituted, as we might say, 'under a description'. This is not true just for the fictional characters and fictional incidents described in the narrative, which acquire their nature and very existence from the modes of their presentation, but also for any real world setting, both material and moral, which itself is presented under a perspective.⁵²

The relation in opaque narratives is one of inseparability, which Lamarque calls 'form-content indivisibility'⁵³ because the point of view (form) and the person, place, or event (content) cannot be separated: one cannot separate either Coketown or London from the point of view Dickens offers on each in the respective novels.

In Lamarque's discussion of paraphrase, he demonstrates the strength of the inseparability relation by questioning the restriction of the prohibition against the substitution of words with synonyms to poetry (where the difference in sound and rhythm is crucial). He maintains that the value of even novel-length literary narratives is likely to be affected by such changes:

A Jane Austen or Charles Dickens novel, let's say, gets its identity, and through that its literary value, in the precise words – give or take minor issues of textual corruption and so forth – written by the author. Wilful changes, even preserving sense, would be unacceptable and undermine work identity. Even more significantly it could never be said with confidence than any given synonym substitution is 'harmless' to a literary narrative.⁵⁴

Lamarque quotes Ian Ousby on the use of the word 'peep' in *Bleak House* and a similar example can be constructed from the use of the words 'human' and 'humane' in *Oliver Twist*, particularly in the first ten chapters (of fifty-three) of the novel.

⁵¹ The lengthy description of Jacob's Island, a rookery in Bermondsey, is paradigmatic in this respect. See Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress* (London: Penguin, 1994), 468–69.

⁵² Lamarque, *Opacity of Narrative*, 166.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

The first instance occurs when the authorities are 'humanely resolved' to send the orphan Oliver to a workhouse.⁵⁵ Subsequently, Mr Bumble states, 'You are a humane woman, Mrs Mann',⁵⁶ a sentence that drips with dramatic irony, in a sincere exchange between two of the most bestial inmates in the narrative's well-populated menagerie. There is also the worrying juxtaposition between 'humane' and 'Mann', which suggests that Mrs Mann might be an everyman, representative of the species – and indeed there is precious little humanity, fellow-feeling, or responsibility demonstrated by any of the characters until Oliver meets the Artful Dodger, who naturally has his own agenda. Shortly after the conversation between Mr Bumble and Mrs Mann, Gambfield explains how the practice of setting fire to the feet of trapped chimney sweeps is 'humane',⁵⁷ causing them to renew their struggles to escape as it does. Dickens then writes of 'what a beautiful thing human nature may be made to be'⁵⁸ when describing Noah, yet another villain whose path Oliver has the misfortune to cross. In London, human nature is characterized in terms of the passion for 'hunting something'⁵⁹ as Oliver is pursued by a crowd on his first outing with the Artful Dodger (a sentiment which will be confirmed when another crowd hounds Bill Sikes to his death). The vision of humanity and human nature which emerges in the initial chapters of *Oliver Twist* is extremely – absolutely, even – bleak, and this perspective is at least in part created by the repetition of the words in an ironic tone, and the restriction of the words to ironic employment until the appearance of Mr Brownlow, who really does have a heart 'large enough for any six ordinary old gentlemen of humane disposition'.⁶⁰ Even here, however, the hyperbole implies how rare an individual of Mr Brownlow's admittedly considerable – but one would hope not exceptional – kindness is in the human species.

Close attention to the diction of literary narratives will show that Lamarque's observation about 'peep' has widespread relevance: 'A single word in so long a novel might seem of marginal significance – and thus easily substitutable – but the lesson from narrative opacity is that there is a standing assumption that form of narration *counts* in the characterization of content.'⁶¹ The issue is not the extent to which the substitution of one of *Oliver Twist's* 160,000-odd words with a synonym would alter the experience of the novel, but the relation between form and content exemplified in opaque narratives. The content of *Oliver Twist* is

⁵⁵ Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶¹ Lamarque, *Opacity of Narrative*, 155.

essentially – not merely loosely or contingently – constituted by the perspectival description and the narrative is therefore necessarily narrated in Dickens's particular mode. This necessary relation means that to realize the content of the novel in a different mode is to lose work identity.

In § 2 I argued, contra Attridge, that staging was an instantiation of form-content inseparability. Less controversially, I have interpreted narrative opacity as a function of form-content inseparability in this section. I regard staging as a development of Bradley's resonant meaning, which can be extended to all literary works, and opacity as the mechanism by which form-content inseparability operates in those literary works which are also narratives. The respective conceptions of staging and opacity complement each other, and Attridge's literary singularity matches Lamarque's formal salience: where formal salience is absent or limited, a narrative will be transparent as one penetrates through the form to the content; transparent narratives, such as newspaper reports, will not be singular because each performance of the narrative will be much the same as the last and unlikely to be open to different interpretations. I proposed staging as a necessary condition of literature in § 2. The notion that opacity is a necessary condition of literary narratives is implicit in Lamarque – a *standing assumption* in the above quotation. The combination of the two concepts produces a version of poetic thickness which is applicable to literary narratives rather than poetry:

NARRATIVE THICKNESS: the inseparability of literary form and literary content in the experience of a literary narrative such that neither form nor content can be isolated without loss of work identity. Narrative thickness is a demand which is satisfied by a work rather than a property of a text, and is characteristic of literary narratives such that if a work is a literary narrative, it will reward the demand for narrative thickness.⁶²

IV. COSTELLO'S LESSONS

A decisive objection to narrative thickness as a necessary condition of a literary narrative would be an example of a work that was literary but did not satisfy the demand for form-content inseparability. The category of didactic literature appears to offer many such counter-examples, works that contain a 'message' or 'moral' that is independent of the work, and is intended specifically for – in

⁶² Narrative thickness should not be confused with Gibson's *thick narratives*. Thick narratives are narratives that provide an insight into ethical values without promoting a particular morality. See John Gibson, 'Thick Narratives', in *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 69–91.

Attridge's terms – *carrying away from the text for further use*. Vladimir Nabokov is keen to distance himself from such works: 'I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow.'⁶³ Bradley holds that in didactic poems 'the poet had a truth or fact – philosophical, agricultural, social – before him, and then, as we say, clothed it in metrical and coloured language.'⁶⁴ Didactic poems are not problematic for Bradley since they are not 'pure poems' and there is thus no requirement that the demand for form-content inseparability be rewarded. Ernest Hemingway offers a similar view in the claim: 'No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in,'⁶⁵ which recalls Cleanth Brooks's warning against conceiving of form as a 'beautified envelope' containing content.⁶⁶ Hemingway's and Brooks's observations are direct challenges to the notion that the demand for narrative thickness will be rewarded by didactic literary works.

The adjective 'didactic' denotes the property of being characterized by instruction or having instruction as an aim. Until recently, the instructive value of literature was simply assumed, and the historical weight of literary didacticism has occasionally been ignored in the twentieth century. Monroe Beardsley, for example, mentions Plato, Matthew Arnold, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and others, but dismisses 3,000 years of instruction as a literary value in two sentences: 'Unfortunately, as far as I can see, nobody has ever given any plausible reasons for the Didactic Theory. There is therefore nothing to refute.'⁶⁷ Didactic theory deserves more attention than he is prepared to grant, but 'didactic' is nonetheless a pejorative term, as Charles Repp points out: 'it is generally understood that *didacticism* refers to some sort of defect in a work of literature as such.'⁶⁸ This defect cannot be a straightforward link to instruction because there are works that are not didactic – Repp cites Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* – despite having instruction as their purpose.⁶⁹

Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* suggests how this negative connotation may have arisen.⁷⁰ Responding to accusations that poetry could not be both

⁶³ Vladimir Nabokov, 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*', in *Lolita* (London: Penguin, 1997), 313.

⁶⁴ Bradley, 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake', 23.

⁶⁵ Ernest Hemingway cited in Ben Stolfus, 'Hemingway's "After the Storm": A Lacanian Reading', in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 52.

⁶⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1975), 226.

⁶⁷ Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 427.

⁶⁸ Charles Repp, 'What's Wrong with Didacticism?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 271.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷⁰ Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesie* (1595; Eugene, OR: Renaissance Editions, 1995), <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/defence.html>.

fictional and instructive, Sidney maintains that poetry instructs by delighting. Samuel Johnson subsequently picked up on this distinction: 'The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing.'⁷¹ As twentieth-century scholars questioned instruction as a literary value, F. R. Leavis,⁷² D. H. Lawrence,⁷³ and others prised appropriate moralism apart from disagreeable didacticism. Despite Leavis's critique of Johnson's alleged requirement that the morality of a work should be explicitly stated, he excused Johnson from 'the most indefensible didacticism.'⁷⁴ Indefensible didacticism in literature is pure instruction and defensible didacticism instruction by pleasing as recommended by Johnson and Sidney. Repp follows Leavis in this respect since to qualify as didactic the instruction must not only be overt, but 'too overt.'⁷⁵

Once these two categories of didacticism are differentiated, my response to the didactic literature objection to narrative thickness becomes obvious. Works which are too overt, that is, messages which have – to employ the terms of Bradley, Brooks, and Nabokov – been *clothed, enveloped, or towed* by fiction, will not reward the demand for narrative thickness. In works which – to employ the terms of Sidney, Leavis, and Repp – didacticism is *pleasurable, defensible, or not too overt* – the demand for narrative thickness will be rewarded. This defence is reliant on the incompatibility between didactic thinness, where the author's intention is to communicate a message, and narrative thickness, where the author's intention is that the work be appreciated as literature. Short of committing to a theory of literature that focused on characteristics such as complexity, ambiguity, and open-endedness as essential to literature, my position is fragile: any interpretation of an overtly didactic work which made a convincing case for the work as literary would prove fatal. If one considers the canon of literature there are, however, very few works that pose this threat – with one notable exception.

J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is a collection of seven short stories (one of which is in two parts) and a postscript, first published in 2003. The full title of the collection is *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, and lessons three and four share the same title, 'The Lives of Animals', with subtitles distinguishing part one from part two. Although my discussion will focus on 'The Lives of Animals', I want to

⁷¹ Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays' (1765), in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1989), 126.

⁷² F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 110–11, and *Anna Karenina and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 197–218.

⁷³ D. H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel', in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1961), 527–32.

⁷⁴ Leavis, *Anna Karenina and Other Essays*, 215.

⁷⁵ Repp, 'What's Wrong with Didacticism?', 272.

draw attention to four of the other titles: 'Realism' (lesson one), 'The Novel in Africa' (lesson two), 'The Humanities in Africa' (lesson five), and 'The Problem of Evil' (lesson six). All four are closer to the titles of lectures or academic papers than short stories, especially the fourth, which identifies the philosophical paradox evinced by the co-existence of evil in the world and a creator who is both omnipotent and benevolent. The combination of these titles with their presentation as lessons creates the expectation of 'messages', of content that will retain its identity independently of the context of the work, and will not thus reward the demand for narrative thickness.

With regard to 'The Lives of Animals', this expectation is heightened because the same short story in two parts appeared in *The Lives of Animals*, a non-fiction collection of essays published in 1999, which combined Coetzee's contribution with responses by Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts. The four replies are philosophical responses to 'The Philosophers and the Animals' (part one) and 'The Poets and the Animals' (part two) read qua philosophy – as lessons or arguments. The content of the narrative appears to meet this expectation since it is concerned with a lecture (part one) and a seminar and a debate (part two) at the fictional Appleton College by novelist Elizabeth Costello. Part one is composed almost entirely of Costello's lecture, a question from the audience, and a discussion of Costello's position at a dinner held in her honour. A significant proportion of part two consists of Costello's seminar in the English department and her debate in the philosophy department. Furthermore, 'The Philosophers and the Animals' includes explicit discussions of German war crimes in Poland,⁷⁶ Thomas Nagel's 1974 philosophy paper 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat',⁷⁷ and the practice of vegetarianism.⁷⁸ 'The Poets and the Animals' includes discussions of Plato and Aquinas,⁷⁹ Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*,⁸⁰ and the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Descartes.⁸¹

'The Lives of Animals' is therefore an apparently straightforward case of didactic literature. Whether the story appears in *The Lives of Animals* or *Elizabeth Costello*, it should be understood as a work of moral philosophy which – due to Coetzee's inventiveness or his desire to contrast the literary approach with the philosophical – has been clothed in or embedded in a fictional narrative. Indeed, in her introduction to *The Lives of Animals*, Amy Gutmann states: 'In the frame of fiction, Coetzee's story of Elizabeth Costello's visit to Appleton College contains

⁷⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), 63–64.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 75–78.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 87–90.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 100–105.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 105–12.

empirical and philosophical arguments that are relevant to the ethical issue of how human beings should treat animals.⁸² The embedding itself seems shallow, and the philosophical discussion dominates more usual narrative concerns like diegetic detail, character development, and closure. Further evidence can be found in the depiction of Costello in *Slow Man*,⁸³ where she is presented as an authorial intrusion into the novel. The protagonist, Paul Rayment, suspects that Costello is writing a book about him, but Costello's presence suggests to the reader that Rayment is nothing more than a character in the book Costello is writing (and Costello a character in the book Coetzee has written). Costello may well simply be Coetzee's alter ego, and David Lynn's review of *Elizabeth Costello* is typical in expressing the critical concern with the relationship between Coetzee and Costello,⁸⁴ whether Costello speaks directly for Coetzee, and whether she should always be regarded as an authorial intrusion of sorts, that is, as a deliberately thinly-disguised characterization of Coetzee himself. If this is the case, there is even less reason to think that the demand for narrative thickness will be met because the eight lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* are literally Coetzee's lessons, messages delivered in the medium of fictional tales.

V. COETZEE'S STORIES

Coetzee has expressed his own view of the relationship between form and content:

a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated with the residue, forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation. There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure. On the keyboard on which they are written, the plus key does not work. There is always a difference; and the difference is not a part, the part left behind after the subtraction. The minus key does not work either: the difference is everything.⁸⁵

Coetzee is thus adamant that narrative form and narrative content cannot and should not be separated. Given that he has written numerous essays, his decision to write about animal suffering in a short story is clearly deliberate rather than imposed. In which case, 'The Lives of Animals' is not intended as a message with an aesthetic covering and the informed reader should expect,

⁸² Amy Gutmann, 'Introduction', in *The Lives of Animals*, by J. M. Coetzee (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

⁸³ J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Vintage, 2005).

⁸⁴ David Lynn, 'Love and Death, and Animals Too', *Kenyon Review* 27 (2005): 125–26.

⁸⁵ J. M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream* 6 (1988): 2–5, 4.

and will indeed find, that the demand for form-content inseparability is rewarded in the work.

The story is not only an example of Attridge's staging, but of what Derrida might have called *staging of staging*. 'The Philosophers and the Animals', was the first of Coetzee's Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Princeton University on 15 October 1997, and 'The Poets and the Animals' the second, which – like the seminar held by Costello in the story – was delivered the next day. Coetzee's lecture was thus a performance of a short story in which a novelist gave a lecture on the relationship between humans and animals. The apposition of Coetzee and Costello, reality and fiction, is reproduced in the appearance of the story and the replies in *The Lives of Animals*, but an extra level of complexity attends the inclusion of the lectures in *Elizabeth Costello*, a collection of short stories which are linked only by the presence of the eponymous character. Here, the reader is invited to read 'The Lives of Animals' qua literature despite knowing that Coetzee presented these stories as Tanner Lectures and published them as essays in *The Lives of Animals*. One of the reasons for this self-reflexive staging becomes apparent when the thematic content of the story is scrutinized. Aside from the explicit concern with the relationship between human and animal, there is a more subtle exploration of the relationship between literature and philosophy, the contrasting ways in which they approach the subject of the moral status of animals, and the failure of the latter – which may explain why Coetzee avoided a straightforward lecture in moral philosophy.

My main concern is whether the didacticism in 'The Lives of Animals' is overt and identifying 'the moral of the story' is thus crucial for my inquiry. The search for such a moral, however, reveals only its absence. There is no immediately obvious, explicit, or readily paraphrased message, despite the tale's trappings as a 'lesson' or 'lecture within a story within a lecture' and despite the narrative including discussions of, and meditations on, questions of moral philosophy. The tale is narrated by John, Costello's son, and the reader sees her entirely from his point of view. She is presented as an admirable individual – highly intelligent and fiercely principled – but not an attractive one. Notwithstanding her finer qualities, Costello seems to fail in the most basic sense of what it means to be human, and has great difficulty maintaining relationships with people: her relationship with John is strained; her relationship with his wife Norma is antagonistic; she has no relationship with John's father; the subsequent story, 'The Humanities in Africa', reveals an uncomfortable relationship with her sister; and her final engagement at the college ends with 'acrimony, hostility, bitterness'.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 112.

What kind of person, one cannot help but ask, devotes so much time and energy to saving the lives of cattle and sheep, but not to their own family, and cannot manage to get along with other human beings?

The fact that the story is told from John's point of view – rather than Costello's or Norma's – is highly significant. The reader has access to John's thoughts and he quickly emerges as a kind, reasonable, personable man. Unlike his mother, he is not an exceptional individual devoted to a higher purpose, but is a successful academic (in the department of physics and astronomy), and a caring husband, father, and son. There is a juxtaposition of John's virtues with those of his mother, but what is perhaps more important is that he has no obvious vices. In short, there is every reason to think that John will provide the reader with an informed and sympathetic perspective of his mother, and that if *he* has doubts about her or her views, these should be taken seriously. On a thematic – as well as personal – level John, who is a scientist (and therefore neutral in the conflict between literature and philosophy), is situated midway between his mother (a successful novelist, suggestive of the capabilities of literature in answering ethical questions) and Norma (an unsuccessful philosopher of mind, suggestive of a discipline which is severely limited, perhaps even defunct).

The overall plot unfolds in the following scenes: John picks up Costello at the airport, Costello lectures, the lecture is discussed at dinner (in part one); John discusses his mother with Norma after dinner, Costello receives a letter objecting to her comparison of the slaughter of animals with the Holocaust,⁸⁷ Costello leads a seminar in the English department, Costello debates with a philosopher, John discusses her with Norma again, John takes Costello back to the airport (in part two). The notion that the story – Costello's arrival, academic activities, and departure – is an aesthetic covering constructed in order to deliver the philosophical message, that the form is merely decorative, is completely unfounded since the absence of a message is made explicit at the end of the second part, when Costello is speaking to John. This final scene provides both narrative closure and retrospectively infuses the story with new patterns of meaning. The following two comments of Costello's are particularly important:

(1) It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participating in a crime of stupefying proportions?⁸⁸

⁸⁷ The comparison may have been inspired by one of Derrida's lectures, delivered at a conference at C erisy three months before Coetzee's Tanner Lectures. See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 26.

⁸⁸ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 114.

(2) Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*⁸⁹

The reader suddenly sees not only Costello, but also her philosophy, from a different perspective. In the discussion leading up to this point she has shown that she is not guilty of the vices which she admits often accompany animal rights advocates (snobbery, superficiality, naivety), she has engaged with opposing viewpoints in rational argument, even when practices discussed (like bullfighting) must physically repulse her, and she has accepted that her views (for example, the Holocaust comparison) are regarded as extreme and offensive. Here, in the last few lines of the tale, the reader realizes that Costello is not a fanatic or even a crusader, that she simply possesses an enhanced sensitivity to animal suffering which – because she is morally motivated – she cannot help but act upon. This sensitivity is presented as a burden, and the conclusion invites a reappraisal of both Costello and her philosophy: she becomes more sympathetic, but her views more questionable. There are at least two features of the narrative that heighten this effect. First, repetition: part one ends with Costello in apparent confusion, with doubt cast upon her intellectual capacities; in part two she rallies, negotiating a series of interrogations with skill and insight; now the doubt returns – this time self-doubt, not about her capacities, but about the value of the sensitivity to which she confesses.

Second, all John can say in response is: 'There, there. It will soon be over.'⁹⁰ Bearing in mind that the reader has come to trust John by this point, to identify with him even, this is a shocking end to the story, a literary equivalent of the 'twist in the tale' common to short genre fiction. The fact that Costello's visit is at an end (and thus already over) and the repeated references to Costello as *old* and *tired* suggest that John is talking about nothing other than her death, a merciful end to the suffering that is the result of her heightened sensitivity. This interpretation is also supported by the content of the final story in the collection, 'At the Gate', which is reminiscent of Kafka's 'Before the Law' (from *The Trial*), and appears to concern Costello's death. Instead of simply arguing – in summary of Costello – that owning a leather lamp is as morally repugnant as owning a lamp made from human skin, Coetzee seems to be suggesting that there are some people who see the world in this way, and questioning whether this sensitivity is desirable. Despite her disingenuous comment in (1), Costello clearly has difficulty

⁸⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

maintaining normal human relationships and one can see why she is estranged when the full impact of her sensitivity is revealed. Closure thus brings indeterminacy rather than resolution. Is it desirable to be a Costello in a world of Normas? John, for one, thinks not, but Coetzee does not provide a straightforward answer.

Although 'The Lives of Animals' can be read qua philosophy or qua literature, the reader who reads it qua philosophy is likely to have an impoverished experience, because part of the work's value is the way it engages with philosophical issues in a literary manner, demonstrating that literature qua literature can engage with ethical issues as well as – if not better than (according to Coetzee) – philosophy. The form as well as the content of the two parts of the story offer contrasting approaches to the lives of animals: Costello's lecture is the focus of 'The Philosophers and the Animals', whereas 'The Poets and the Animals' is more of a traditional narrative. Even though the inclusion of 'The Lives of Animals' in *The Lives of Animals* appears to be an invitation to read the short story qua philosophy, to read it qua philosophy – to extract Costello's arguments and views – is to miss something significant about the way in which the short story, the collection *Elizabeth Costello*, and literature in general can explore moral problems while being read qua literature. I selected 'The Lives of Animals' as a paradigmatic example of a didactically thin work of literature. I showed that there are numerous reasons to expect a *message with an aesthetic covering*, that is, content which is salient to the extent that the particular mode of narration is not necessary to the communication of that message. Subsequently, I offered evidence from Coetzee and the story to establish that 'The Lives of Animals' does not admit of an alternate mode of presentation: the particular content is necessarily expressed in the particular form of the story. The demand for narrative thickness is thus rewarded and the didacticism revealed to be of the pleasurable, defensible, or covert sort. 'The Lives of Animals' therefore fails as a counter-example and I conclude that narrative thickness is indeed a necessary condition of literary narratives.

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