

Peter Swirski

Literature, Analytically Speaking. Explorations in the Theory of Interpretation, Analytic Aesthetics, and Evolution.

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As Hans Maes underscored in his recent essay “Intention, Interpretation and Contemporary visual Art” (*Journal of Aesthetics*, 2010), “The role of the artist’s intention in the interpretation of art has been the topic of a lively and ongoing discussion in analytical aesthetics for years”. From my point of view, there is no better study than *Literature, Analytically Speaking* to serve as an introduction to these lively debates and to provide resolutions (both theoretical and in terms of what I. A. Richards memorably dubbed practical criticism) to some of the problems that have bedevilled literary and art-interpreters since Aristotle.

Swirski’s analytical brilliance and his breathtaking expertise in literature and literary studies are obvious at every step of the way. Chapter-wise, he lays out a battle plan, offers an ontologically robust definition of art, decouples texts and works, develops a cogent theory of fiction, resolves the kinks that plague most accounts of fictional truth, and points the way forward in the study of literary truth (cognition) and beauty (aesthetics) by tying both to the adaptive mechanisms implanted in all of us by evolution.

Before this, however, in the second-last chapter “Intention and Interpretation” he stops to analyze Thomas Dish’s spectacular novel *The M.D.* in the context of the theoretical debates that precede it, providing a perfect illustration of—and a valuable checkpoint for—the role of authorial intentions in the process of aesthetic interpretation of literary works. If I focus on this chapter below, it is precisely to the extent that it forms the heart of the book. As it should. Dealing head-on with intentionality, the bugbear of all deconstructionist critics who have hijacked literary studies to the great detriment of the discipline, it is crucial to the understanding of Swirski’s masterpiece as well as to the understanding of how his contemporary approach can be understood in terms of Ingarden’s phenomenology.

Although Swirski does *not* make this point, the precise, measured and analytical (not to say scientific) manner in which he develops his arguments presents a good opportunity for a timely aside on the problem of relation between idealism and realism. As a matter of principle, in terms of research in the humanities, scholars need to pursue aesthetic objectivity in order to be able to say something meaningful and precise about aesthetic subjectivity. Coming strongly on the side of “moderate intentionalism”—a term introduced by scholars in analytic philosophy but beautifully developed by Swirski in the context of literary studies—*Literature, Analytically Speaking* develops a series of arguments against interpreting artworks in terms of “hypothetical intentionalism” (grounded in the heuristic of an implied author). This is not to say that Swirski is unaware of the challenges mounted over the years against actual intentionalism, albeit almost always in its radical form. He writes:

It is certainly not true that for every work of literature one can pinpoint its creator's goals with incontestable accuracy. However, to exclude such knowledge *a priori* from aesthetic considerations is not to interpret a literary work but merely to engage in reading the text.... Given how much time and effort—at times many years and many thousand of draft pages—go into the composition of literary works, it is unconscionable to reject out of hand an aesthetic appreciation of these works as intentional artifacts. (140)

As far as I can tell, on Swirski's understanding, intentionality distinguishes any work of art from *real* objects like rocks or clouds or pieces of driftwood and from *ideal* (Platonic, if you like) entities. Despite its "mereness", intentionality nourishes a sense of aesthetics reality, i.e., the impossibility of its being swallowed by idealistic, "psychologistic" and materialistic visions of the world—one that makes an autonomous structure of the work emerge from the internally experienced artistic-aesthetic experience. This allows us to discern a motif that is found in much of his criticism of more or less contemporary scholars, from those of the various formalisms to those of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. The defense of an "impersonal"—in the sense of interpersonally transferable and comparable—way of studying problems of interpretation, which are irreducible to the subjectivity of either the artist or the reader, lies at the center of Swirski's theory of aesthetics.

Once again, I can do no better than avail myself of another precise formulation from the pages of *Literature, Analytically Speaking*:

Moderate intentionalism is about approaching data on agency, intentions, and the overall economy of the art-historical context *critically* with a view to their relevance to aesthetic interpretation. One crucial reason moderate intentionalism is distinct from—and superior to—the position embraced by Hirsch or Vickers is that it allows for failed intentions. The conceptual difference and interpretive consequences could hardly be greater. (142)

There is no doubt that Swirski goes into this problem deeper than anybody else in literary studies, notably including Roman Ingarden. You could say that Swirski transposes the antipsychologism of *Logische Untersuchungen* onto the plane of contemporary analytic philosophy, demonstrating that a literary work has an autonomous ontological status (i.e., one which cannot be reduced to real or ideal entities). Ingarden was particularly interested in the structural analysis of artworks and of aesthetically interpretable objects in general; alas, he did not have much to say about the pragmatic—intention-based and interactive context-based—dimensions of the process of interpretation. This is not the case with Swirski, who raises his philosophical banner adorned with a simple slogan: *intentions should inform the process of interpretation* (without, I feel obliged to add, necessarily determining it). This is the best summary of the seventh chapter I can muster and the best summary of this beautifully written and beautifully argued book.

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