

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 17 (2025)

But in a Fiction: Eminent Texts and the Horizon of the Philosophy Seminar Room

Ramsey Eric Ramsey

Barrett, the Honors College Arizona State University USA

ORCID: 0000-0001-9203-2963

Abstract

This essay repeats the case for the power of fictional texts as works used in philosophical seminars focused on hermeneutics. It provides reminders of the truth disclosing power of fictional texts, not as evidence of other hermeneutic theories, rather as a way of doing hermeneutics itself. It concludes with an image of cartography to assist readers as they make their way in the world.

Keywords: hermeneutics, fiction, novels, truth, aesthetics

Since the Beginning

We live a great portion of our lives in the surrender to stories about our lives, and about possible lives; we live more or less in stories, depending how strongly we resist surrendering to what is “only” imagined.
—Wayne C. Booth

For all the other differences between them, in the tales told concerning Socrates and Jesus of Nazareth, when they are confronted by looks of incomprehension, they at times each respond in quite similar ways. To attempt to turn the looks of their interlocutors from bewilderment toward a better understanding they each enact this prologue which in essence says: let me tell you a story. When a series of propositions, however profound, fall short of saying what they wish, fiction comes to their aid. These fictions, say the Cave Allegory for the former and the story of the Prodigal Son for the latter, although massively distant from what will come to be called the novel, nonetheless, share this essential feature to our living well *viz.*, truths are able to be disclosed through fictions.

For some time now (or since the beginning) stories have come to the aid of philosophy, yet I do not hesitate to say philosophy understands how to return the favor when the stories themselves do the baffling. However, in this short set of reflections, whose only overt goal is but to open a discussion of the broad horizon of hermeneutics, education, and eminent texts, I shall say again a few words about the imaginative power of fictions to further the pedagogical cause of hermeneutics as it confronts those of us for whom the main lesson we wish to share is to persuade and/or remind ourselves hermeneutics is at the heart of being human.

The Pleasure and Progress in Repetition

I would like to insist on this because it is a recurrent accusation and, given the constraints of time and context, I will have to speak a little brutally: I have never tried to confuse literature and philosophy or to reduce philosophy to literature. I am very attentive to the difference of space, of history, of historical rites, of logic, of rhetoric, protocols and argumentation. I try to be attentive to this distinction as much as possible.
—Jacques Derrida

As with hearing an old story still comports the power to bring news and insight into our way of being today, I take a nearly indescribable pleasure in repeating this familiar

hermeneutic claim about fictions, which is no doubt familiar to all of us. Consequently, I wish to remind by sharing, if for no other reason than to act as prompt, a few words about how novels translate the everyday goings on of the life-world into disclosures that are able to enhance hermeneutic thinking when they experiment with what human beings might do together. This brief sketch is based in large part on my pedagogical experience in seminars when long weeks of studying and engaging philosophical texts is followed by the reading of one or more novels whose way of translating experience is unique yet their disclosures—because they are works of art—are housed in the neighborhood with thinking itself. Accordingly, when novels are assigned in philosophical seminars as something other than a mere example of some philosophical concept, their proximity to hermeneutic theory makes them not simply texts in need of interpretation but texts thinking interpretation itself—or, perhaps more to the point, thinking life itself.

The neighborhood shared by story broadly thought and thinking beyond mere calculation does not mean they are completely coincidental, however, movement between them is part of the task of thinking as such. Of course, these border crossings are types of translations as they move by way of interpretation to understandings of how one might live, how life might go were we to go about it this way or that, or how we might have a chance of saying things that matter about the universality of hermeneutics, or how to make peace, or how we might go about better in the next moments confronting us.

As works of art, eminent novels do the work of art, which is to say, when doing their best they make novel what has grown mundane—they make the way we care about ourselves and care about others new; they make news of what has grown stale and obscure, obscure not for being absent rather by being ubiquitous and habitual and thus hidden by this very everywhere-ness. In this way both novels and philosophy in their own ways, due to how each is able to use words, makes foreign what shows itself as native.

This setting into relief by submitting the everyday for our consideration, often achieves its profundity, ironically perhaps, by the novel taking the mundane and the quotidian as its object of study.¹ In its way the novel interrogates what goes on all the time and makes it special. Literary fictions turn our attention to all we have missed while attuning us to the living of life itself while highlighting the constant requirement to enact interpretation as our way of having to be who we are as Dasein. What we have

¹ For a full-length articulation of the ethics of relief, see Ramsey Eric Ramsey, *The Long Path to Nearness* (Humanities Press, 1998).

trouble seeing because of its always already being too close and being seemingly understood through and through, eminent texts translate these goings on into stories allowing us the distance we need to focus on what has been too near to see clearly. These experiments in the translation of experience might be put this way: they are from experience about experience so as to activate through the artifice of fiction a way to return us altered to our own experience of the life-world.

What versus How

For man's relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature, and hence intelligible. Thus, hermeneutics is, as we have seen, a universal aspect of philosophy . . .
—Hans-Georg Gadamer

In spite of putting it this way, it is also the case that novels are seldom about anything all that new. In David Mitchell's masterpiece *Cloud Atlas* we find the character of Timothy Cavendish, a book editor, showing us the way art has of being ever-new without ever being other than it is (and has been). In imagining a cynical critic responding to the manuscript he is reading and of which he is fond he hears this critic saying: "but it's been done a *hundred* times before!" Cavendish grants this (and how not?) yet we would do well if his further rejoinder became a part of our reservoir of response: "as if there could be anything *not* done a hundred *thousand* times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void Webber! As if Art is the *What* and not the *How*."² Novels, as we know, are the place where words mix together in as yet unimagined and experimental ways to see what will come of this new concoction, what results will result from trying things this way in this particular formulation, what will happen to thinking this time if put this way. Albeit too quickly, let us put it this way: No one mistakes Virginia Woolf for Ernest Hemingway and yet, because they translate the experience of the life-world in their unique manner, they nonetheless cover similar ground—each discloses via their singular *how* the universality of the hermeneutic dimension of our being-in-the-world (i.e., the ever-present *what*).

As we know, in *Cloud Atlas* Mitchell nestles six different novels written in six different genres into a single interconnected story. Thus, in terms of perspectives akin to Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, this genius novel discloses an essential hermeneutic lesson, which stated simply is this: it matters how you look at things. One marvelous beauty

² David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Random House, 2004), 357 (Mitchell's italics and capitalizations).

of *Cloud Atlas* is its way of being six different manners of disclosing some nuanced view of the same *what* via six different genres. If the *what* is, generally speaking, the predacity human being together has manifested for centuries, then it is also about love and the need for solidarity if the excellence of responsibility and freedom is to be achieved. Insofar as these two ways of being that are in obvious tension with one another are the theme of *Cloud Atlas* across all six narratives, it is thus an embodiment of the hermeneutic claim that even six stories about the same thing—even six as brilliantly told as Mitchell’s—are not enough to get the whole story. Even this inventive and imaginative how is finite and incomplete because, as hermeneutics teaches, never having access to the whole story is a central part of what finitude writes into the narrative of our being together.

If, as George Elliot says “Art is the nearest thing to life,” then art is to be forever welcome in our hermeneutic seminars.³ Furthermore, if it is also the case, as Elliot goes on to say, art “is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot,” then the art of the novel has an especially welcomed place in hermeneutic philosophy. They are so welcomed because, like the best hermeneutic philosophy, they say what does not get said otherwise and elsewhere.

On this point, writing of the experiment undertaken by Hanif Kureishi in his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Zadie Smith sets out for us why novels of any genre are able to do what other forms of communication are unable: “To Kureishi the world is weird and various, comic and tragic. If this mixed reality can’t always be fully admired while standing on soapboxes, sitting in parliament, or marching down Whitehall, it should at least be allowed an existence in novels.”⁴ It seems we ask both hermeneutic philosophy and novels to say what appears only to be able to be said by them.

We need both hermeneutic philosophy and fiction to see who we might become. Furthermore, the stakes are high. As the novelist Ursula K. Le Guin makes succinct when she writes of these: “All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don’t, our lives get made up for us by other people.”⁵

³ George Elliot, *The Natural History of German Life*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2016).

⁴ Zadie Smith, *Feel Free* (Penguin Books, 2018), 241.

⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Operating Instructions,” in *Wave of the Mind* (Shambala, 2004), 208.

To close, a word about maps and guides and what they might provide.

Were we to ask how to get to the seminar room, how to get to the café we adore just off Prešern Square, or how to get to any great city's museum of fine art, then cartographers are there to help; they have methods to produce directions that when followed place us at our desired destination. However, as hermeneutics goes to great lengths to show, such maps with such efficiency and ready success do not exist when we ask how do we get to love, how do we get to genuine experience, or whence the way to the multi-variant solidarity needed to refuse the many and various attempts of those who would program our lives for us? Here we need a cloud atlas, which like the attempt to map the ever-moving and ever-changing canopy overhead, is only able to give a general sense by fostering an attunement to ever-changingness itself. In this way, then, I suggest, all eminent texts add to the wisping pages in the cloud atlas we require in this constantly moving lifeworld.

To help us see our studies as attempts to add provisional coordinates into this impossible cloud cartography, let's act as if we are they who desire to understand ourselves and one another, and who consequently make these (among other) requests of eminent texts and philosophy: tell us a story that might help us understand better; tell us story in which we might see anew what we have grown accustomed to seeing; tell us a story after the encounter with which we might be better practitioners of hermeneutics. In a word, please tell us a story so we might simply be better at accomplishing the inescapable task of having to get around.