

# Why cannot literary interpretation do without taste?

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*ABSTRACT. This paper presents a negative answer to the question of whether literary interpretation can take place without some kind of exercise of taste. By endorsing an experiential account of interpretation and identifying taste as the set of cognitive abilities that are put into play when we experience literature, I test the possibility of accounting for the different interpretive moments that take place during our literary experience by appealing to an exercise of taste. To this end, I take perception, imagination, emotion and cognitive assimilation, as the main mental processes that are involved in interpretation, and aim to illustrate how the exercise of taste permeates each of them and allows for their interaction. After considering some objections, I reassert that appealing to the exercise of taste successfully acknowledges what seems to be the ultimate purpose of interpretation as appreciation, i.e., maximizing the literary experience and stress its compatibility with the normativity of aesthetic appreciation.*

## 1. Interpretation and taste

Interpreting literature implies more than analyzing themes and structures objectively. When readers interpret novels, they engage in appreciative experience closely linked to interpretation: appreciation both lies in and stands for the different interpretive modes characterizing the reader's experience. This opposes Noël Carroll's approach, which subsumes interpretation under critical evaluation without necessary appreciative engagement. Carroll dissociates art evaluation from aesthetic experience, arguing that aesthetic dimensions don't interfere with

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artworks' artistic value. Within this framework, engaging with literary works aims to grasp what's artistically valuable about them. This excludes aesthetic relevance, which seems to mark our appreciative experiences.

Alternatively, Jeremy Page identifies interpretation as necessarily appreciative, providing aesthetic understanding that grounds judgements about works' aesthetic character<sup>2</sup>. Readers must engage in appreciative interpretation and develop a certain kind of “experiential sensitivity to the artwork's particular aesthetic character and/or value” (Page, 2022, 52). This approach makes interpretation both appreciative and experiential: discovering a novel's aesthetic character and artistic value is possible only through appreciative experience. For instance, the evaluation of *Giovanni's room* as excellent mid-20th century *queer* literature becomes possible through appreciative interpretation that develops while reading—forming ideas about theme based on events and reactions the novel provokes. Pointing to appreciative interpretation's experiential nature stresses both the agential aspect (direct, active, autonomous engagement) and the qualitative or phenomenological aspect (the experience's value). Two implications follow. First, our “initial first responses to a work (perceptual, affective and reflective)” (Page, 2022, 53) are appreciative reactions, not non-appreciative cognitive processes whose results inform appreciative interpretation. Second, if interpretation is experiential, some phenomenological attitude or ability must tie together what objects offer and what results from experience. This paper argues why and how taste's involvement accounts for both.

As for taste, in a Kantian vein, Alan Goldman outlines what this notion captures: the interaction between cognitive abilities activated when engaging with literature. For Goldman, pleasure in reading lies in “the satisfaction derived from the [...] full and interactive exercise of our mental capacities: perceptual, imaginative, emotional, and cognitive. For a work of art to so engage these capacities simultaneously and interactively is the mark of aesthetic value” (Goldman, 2013, 3). The “play” between mental abilities manifests throughout literary experience as we react to works' features, eliciting pleasure or displeasure attitudes that mark experience positively or negatively. This paper's notion of taste identifies it with the articulation of mental abilities involved in experiencing works, allowing readers to react to novels' features and develop appreciative attitudes.

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<sup>2</sup> See Page (2022, 49)

### 1.1. An experiential approach

The importance of stressing the experiential dimension of literary interpretation stems from an observation regarding our literary engagement: whatever it is that we get to grasp about the work lies in the experience we have of it, and consequently the different activities that constitute that experience have something to do with our interpretive process. An experiential account points to this idea: we interpret during the experience, that is, as we engage with the work at hand. In this sense, our experience and interpretation of a literary work are one and the same thing. According to this approach, what a work means "rests upon the experience induced in an adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator" (Wollheim, 1987, 22). To apply this from paintings to novels, what a literary work means depends on what an "adequately sensitive, adequately informed" reader is capable of experience when reading.

This relates to Gregory Currie's linguistically encoded meaning (LEM) of text-based works<sup>3</sup>. LEM is "the meaning of the text itself: something that is context free and preinterpretive" (Currie, 2004, 124-125)—certain constitutive features' discernment is immediate, incorrigible, and non-reliant on interpretation, and LEM is one such feature. For example, *The Secret History*'s meaning rests on experience induced in English readers grasping LEM who are familiar with characters' way of life and sensitive to expressive offerings. If grasping LEM is preinterpretive, we needn't try to understand text to actually understand it; while reading, we simply do or don't. Additionally, we can understand text without understanding work, so any meaning beyond LEM must result from interpretation. For instance, getting *The Secret History*'s point exceeds understanding the words' literal meaning. It demands engaging in different ways, all conceivable as instances of exercising taste. Regarding the plot: hypothesizing about the theme (friendship, economic class) and identifying the overall argument (the wealthy's immoral propensity). Regarding the text: identifying structural patterns (before/after crucial events) and reacting to narration's rhythm and nuances. Regarding the story: sympathizing with characters or failing to (pitying or mocking them). Though these actions constitute getting the work, we needn't consciously "try" when reading ordinarily: it comes with reading novels. Our ultimate purpose remains constant: seeking the most valuable, richest, fullest experience possible.

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<sup>3</sup> See Currie (2004, 120)

Overall, the way "perception, cognition, emotion and imagination combine and blend in the appreciation of literary works, as they do in appreciating other forms of art" (Goldman, 2013, 6) matches the kind of phenomenon the notion of taste as presented tries to apprehend. That is, taste as the exercise and interaction of a reader's mental faculties seems to account for the way different interpretive acts interfere with each other and constitute the overall appreciative experience of the work. Accordingly, we could state the following: we interpret—that is, we grasp elements of, get the point of, appreciate—the work we engage with by exercising taste to a greater or lesser extent. In the next section, we identify four different moments within the interpretive process of literature in which an appeal to the exercise of taste can explain the kind of engagement with the work that each of them provides.

## 2. Reading as interpreting

Firstly, with regard to perceptual discernment, “even the direct perception of elements and their properties, if their description is a matter of dispute, counts as interpretation” (Goldman, 2013, 16). That is, the discernment of features and properties of works, while always rooted in their objective elements, can be subject to the interpretive process of the reader and therefore can be accounted for by the exercise of taste. Richard Wollheim distinguishes three perceptual qualities that point to particular ways of perceiving that diverge from uninformed, direct, aseptic perception of what is already “there” in the work: “(one) *seeing-in*: (two) *expressive perception*: and (three) the capacity to experience *visual delight*” (Wollheim, 1987, 45). He specifically refers to paintings, but his characterization is easily applicable to other works of art, including literature. Turning to Goldman again, in literature these perceptual qualities would be “quasi-perceptual” (Goldman, 2013, 5): by directly perceiving the text, we indirectly “perceive” non-sensible features of the novel that we otherwise grasp immediately.

Let's imagine two readers of *The Secret History*, reader A and reader B. While reader A perceives Donna Tartt's writing style as dense, reader B finds it light. This would be an example of seeing-in the novel: despite the text not being dense or light on its own, both readers perceive it that way, respectively, given that they neither reflect nor infer the density or lightness of the text from its objective properties. Furthermore, on the grounds of seeing-in the novel a dense style, reader A might have the expressive perception of it being an either skillful or pretentious

exercise of literary writing, which in turn would manifest as a form of delight –e.g. enjoyment, if perceived as skillful– or the lack thereof –annoyance, if perceived as pretentious. Similarly, on the grounds of seeing-in the novel a light style, reader B might have the expressive perception of it being an either perspicuous or basic example of literary writing, which then too would manifest as, for example, feeling admiration or boredom. This perceptual divergence between A and B’s reading experiences is easily understood when appealing to different exercises of taste as conceived in this paper: reader A’s cognitive stock, imaginary abilities, literary journey and even character traits differ from reader B’s and partake in their “quasi-perception” of the novel through the perception of the text, which is the only directly perceivable feature of literary works.

Secondly, the different associations and/or mental representations that the reader creates as they engage with the work are also explained by the exercise of taste, in this case with regard to the mental ability of imagination. There are two ways in which imaginative engagement with literature can manifest itself: the production of mental representations, usually induced by imagery; and the making of associations between information provided by the work and pieces of our cognitive stock that might become relevant while reading, such as the production of abductive judgements. Both ways of imagining while reading involve an articulation of imagination and other mental abilities like emotion and perception, and overall call for several cognitive processes that influence each other –as the notion of taste captures. Let’s look at this passage:

As I was on my way there for my first class, I saw Francis Abernathy stalking across the meadow like a blackbird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind. He was preoccupied, smoking a cigarette but the thought that he might see me filled me with an inexplicable anxiety. I ducked into a doorway and waited until he had passed.

One way in which a reader could imaginatively engage with what is narrated would be to imagine themselves as Richard, the narrator, looking at and seeing Francis, while interpreting the metaphors about him: “crowlike” as a way of pointing to the dark and mysterious vibe of Francis’ figure, or “like a blackbird” to enhance his elegance and demeanor. Another way would be for the reader to empathize with Richard by imagining the feeling of anxiety he is referring to, but also to associate that “inexplicable anxiety” with Richard’s admiration towards Francis –as previously hinted in the novel–, or to the fear of being discovered and it all seeming like Richard was spying on him the whole time. Granted that every reader of this passage would

in one way or another engage imaginatively with it, and that what we call imagination doesn't differ between cases, the resultant mental representations and associations would inevitably take different shapes depending on the subject and their particular exercise of taste.

Thirdly, the way each reader engages emotionally with a given work is also conditioned by their exercise of taste, for the emotions aroused by the novel's features may vary depending on the experience. Let's return to the passage of *The Secret History* introduced in the previous paragraph to illustrate this idea. Some expressions of Richard's monologue, like "stalking across the meadow like a blackbird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind", may induce in the reader not only the creation of certain mental images or the making of certain associations regarding Francis' character as regarded by Richard, but also a feeling of, for example, uncertainty and caution. But it could be the case that they instead feel rather curious towards, or even attracted to, Francis.

Similarly, sentences like "the thought that he might see me filled me with an inexplicable anxiety" may induce in the reader a similar sensation to the one expressed by the narrator, that is, a feeling of unease. Nonetheless, that same sentence could arouse in the reader a feeling of tenderness towards Richard's socially anxious and awkward personality. In each case, the emotional response of the reader would lie in focusing on a more or less specific element on the work, as well as in a certain moral understanding of the scene. In the former, the unsettling description of Francis prevails, in addition to a moral judgement of Richard's lurking as improper. In the latter, the naïve behavior of Richard is what marks the reader's experience, accompanied by some kind of complicity felt towards the narrator's analysis of Francis. In both scenarios, as the reading continues, those now appreciative features that become available to the reader thanks to –in this case– engaging affectively with the novel, can be compared to, associated or somehow related to new personality traits or events encountered later on in the story.

Finally, the information that a reader assimilates in the face of what the constitutive elements of the work hint at is also conditioned by an exercise of taste. In the case of literary works, particularly of narratives, what the work is about –both in a general sense and regarding concrete plot points or character traits– can be more or less transparently conveyed through its features. Consequently, the cognitive assimilation of the information that might be relevant for engaging with a novel depends on the particular way in which a reader both processes whatever

the work offers on its own and articulates the objective features or data with their personal cognitive stock. In simpler terms, for a reader to understand the different keys of significance of a given work, they don't just expose themselves to what the novel objectively offers and try to grasp as much of it as possible, but they actively engage with it, putting into play their cognitive abilities and therefore having a unique understanding of what's significant in the work. For instance, understanding the former passage of *The Secret History* implies that a reader would do more than just process the words of the text correctly: they would empathize with a feeling of anxiety that is, to Richard, "inexplicable"; and also, from the outside, they would assume that the "inexplicable anxiety" is best explained as a manifestation of the embarrassment felt by Richard before Francis' inaccessible aura. The latter assumption is possible because the reader previously learnt that Richard feels like an outsider among his colleagues, given their higher social and economic status, and so they perceive the mix of infatuation and insecurity in Richard's narrative voice every time he talks about his peers. As the reader goes on reading, they gather different pieces of information suggested by the text and, by connecting them, they start grasping an overall meaning.

In summary, everything we do to get the point of a novel is conditioned by the way our cognitive abilities are put into play in a particular manner. As such, literary interpretation is not just concerned with grasping objective features of the work with some sort of significance but is also subjectively influenced by each reader's affective and cognitive engagement. We attempted to show that the exercise of taste can account for this subjective dimension of the process of literary interpretation by illustrating its influence in different interpretive moments or acts. Nonetheless, there might still be some concerns with the necessity of drawing on the notion of taste for us to successfully characterize what it means to understand a work and how exactly we engage with it. In the next section, three possible objections to our proposal are addressed and –hopefully– answered.

### **3. Objections**

So far, the purpose of this paper has been to argue for an experiential account of literary interpretation, as well as to showcase the different interpretive stages in which it is possible to point to an exercise of taste. By doing so, we concluded that for a reader to properly get the

point of a novel, they ought to not just read the constitutive text and grasp its literal meaning, but also to actively engage with it by exercising taste that results in a somewhat subjectively influenced interpretive process. Several concerns could be raised with regards to this; here we address three.

- A. To understand a novel is to be able to follow the story and to grasp its content, and that does not require an exercise of taste.

As Peter Kivy stresses,

The serious thoughtful reader [...] is both in it for the story *and* thinks in the gaps and in the after life about the theses that the author of the novel meant to convey by the story. *Both* make up what I would call this reader's literary experience of the novel or, in more general terms, his artistic experience of it. But, so far, the experience [...] contains no significant *aesthetic* component. Neither the experience of the story nor the contemplation of the theses that the story is meant to convey have anything to do with "aesthetic properties". (Kivy, 2011, 34)

For Kivy, aesthetic properties are perceptual or, at most, expressive. In the case of literary works, this characterization varies according to the specific kind of work. For instance, poetry has sonic –i.e. directly perceptual– properties related to its recitation that, on the contrary, narrative works don't. But overall, the aesthetic properties encountered in any literary work are limited to structural, linguistic and emotive properties. Nonetheless, the case of narratives is particularly sterile when it comes to its aesthetic significance. On the one hand, regarding structural properties, Kivy argues that these are hardly ever noticed by the reader of novels and therefore are "not a rich source of aesthetic experience" (Kivy, 2011, 73). On the other hand, given that linguistic properties of literature are directly tied to sonic purposes, prose literary language is significantly poorer regarding its aesthetic relevance than poetic language. Finally, emotive properties are artistically relevant, but according to Kivy this does not necessarily turn them into aesthetic properties –in fact, for him, they are not. In this sense, Kivy distinguishes between knowing an emotion and feeling it, and states that the former is the usual way in which we have an emotional understanding of novels –more often than not, we learn about the character's emotions rather than responding emotionally to the plot.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Kivy (2011, 139)

In summary, the formal elements of narrative works (especially of fiction) are almost irrelevant when reading them. In contrast, the significant features on which the reader focuses are content-related ones, that is, the plot and the external theses that could be intentionally transmitted through storytelling. This being so, formal properties are also the aesthetically relevant ones, while content-related properties are not. As such, the latter play “little part in the novel reader’s understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of novels, even when the reader is a sensitive, serious one and the novel a serious or even great literary work of art” (Kivy, 2011, 94).

There are several ways of responding to Kivy’s characterization of literary understanding. Firstly, again drawing on Goldman, it is possible to argue that the “grasp of philosophical theses implicit in the novels [...] depends in part on appreciation of formal structure”, and that “access to these descriptions is greatly facilitated and reinforced by our implicit feeling for the developing structures of the narratives as we read” (Goldman, 2013, 5). Accordingly, the structural elements of literary fiction influence the interpretation of works despite the reader not perceiving, not being aware of, or not focusing on them in the first place. For example, the writing style, the opacity of the text, intensional contexts, larger structural patterns and relations between characters and/or events, and so on. In addition to this, despite the reader’s usual engagement with prose literary languages not being directly perceptual, it equally provides quasi-perceptual experiences that form part of the interpretive process and, therefore, are aesthetically relevant. For example, features such as the rhythm and texture of language, the narrative tone of the storytelling, predicates of sensible properties, or metaphors, all influence the reader’s interpretation of a novel and thus gain aesthetic relevance in their experience.

Secondly, “following” the story of a novel also requires more than just the correct processing of the succession of the various events that make up the work’s plot. To properly understand it, it is required for the reader to engage in the task of figuring out the overall meaning of the story, and to be somehow affected by it; that is, they need to have a certain “emotional engagement along with perceptual and cognitive” (Goldman, 2013, 5). As readers, we could actively engage with a story by, for instance, attuning to the plot, making up a complete picture of the represented events, grasping its unity (maybe under a theme), resonating with the overall importance of said theme, and so on. Furthermore, against Kivy, emotive properties of novels are actually less related to knowing the character’s emotions than to feeling those of our own emotions as a reaction to the story. Thirdly, it is the case that the aesthetic value of novels can

be more or less linked to the explicit content they offer, and so each work elicits a greater or lesser exercise of taste depending on its features. For instance, *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* by Irene Solà asks for a more incisive exercise of taste than *The Final Empire* by Brandon Sanderson: while the former presents the same series of events from the perspective of different –and even non-human– characters, the latter is heavily plot-focused.

- B. Emotional reactions are “prescribed” by the constitutive elements of the work, and therefore no exercise of taste is needed for a reader to have them.

This idea stems from Carroll’s cognitivist approach to emotions, according to which novels present

a criterially prefocused text –a text structured in such a way that the description or depiction of the object of our attention is such that it will activate our subsumption of the event under the categories that are criterially relevant to certain emotional states. Once we recognize the object under those categories, the relevant emotion is apt [...] to be raised in us. (Carroll, 2001, 228)

As such, emotions are rational, that is, responsive to knowledge, so the reader’s emotional reactions are tied by the constitutive elements of the narrative. For example, suspense is an apt emotional response to *The Secret History* because the events of the plot are presented in such a way that the relevant reaction to their unfolding is with suspense. Bunny’s death counts as “an event where some outcome that we regard to be morally righteous is improbable” (Carroll, 2001, 227); thus, as the reading continues and the circumstances surrounding Bunny’s death unfold, the suspense is fueled by the reader “keeping track of the shifting probabilities for the forces of good versus the forces of evil” (Carroll, 2001, 227). In turn, no exercise of taste is involved in this reader’s emotional engagement with the novel, for feeling suspense with *The Secret History* is a rational reaction to the elements of the story which the reader comes to know (or not know) via a pre-structured text.

With regards to this objection, firstly it can be argued that a “criterially prefocused” text can raise different but equally reasonable emotional responses, including those that were not intended by the author. For instance, the fact that *The Secret History* is meant to be a suspense novel does not rule out the possibility of reacting to it with amusement as the primary emotion, and it would be equally supported by features of the work: instead of focusing on the unsettling circumstances surrounding Bunny’s death, one could focus on the messiness of Richard’s inner

monologue. Secondly, the reasons for an emotion to be apt vary according to the specific reader and the experiential context of the reading. For instance, the suspense felt with *The Secret History* might make the reader focus on the circumstances of Bunny's death, or on Richard's final destiny, or on the entitlement of the characters despite their questionable actions. Overall, even though the text is fixed, the emotional response to it isn't, for it depends on what the reader does "with" the work, that is, their exercise of taste.

Thirdly, a distinction between knowledge and understanding made by Carroll is relevant to the characterization of the cognitive process involved in emotional responses to narratives. As stated in *Art, narrative and moral understanding*:

Understanding is the ability to make connections between what we already know [...] the activity of refining what we already know, of recognizing connections between parts of our knowledge stock, of bringing what we already know to clarity through a process of practice and judgement. [...] it is this kind of understanding [...] to which engaging with the narrative artworks may contribute (Carroll, 1998, 143-144)

If emotional reactions result from this kind of process, then the emotional understanding of works is dependent both on the knowledge stock and the cognitive processing of the reader. To illustrate this, let's bring back reader A and B. While reader A has certain prejudices regarding "old money" people and presents a rigid moral compass, reader B is unfamiliar with wealth-related behavioral traits and open to immoral acts in fiction. When reading *The Secret History*, it is expected that the pieces of knowledge and cognitive associations that make A feel suspense are different from B's, but just as relevant and compatible with the text. The difference here presented lies in the exercise of judgement that is involved in each case and therefore exemplifies an exercise of taste.

C. Attuning to the work is not necessary for a reader to interpret it.

The personal importance of the experience that results from the reader's interpretive process is independent of them grasping the relevant features, meaning and content of the work. In turn, if the reader resonates or not with the novel is irrelevant for them to understand it. Aesthetic understanding demands that the reader not only to properly identify the work's aesthetic character and value, but also that they be able to experience the novel as such; that is, to have an "appreciative interpretation" (Page, 2022, 58) of it. Nonetheless, this doesn't require the reader to personally resonate with the work, for "the appropriate focus of aesthetic appreciation

and judgement is [...] the pursuit of aesthetic understanding” (Page, 2022, 58), and not the other way around. The only requirement implicit in this characterization of aesthetic understanding is for it to be grounded in a “first-hand” –but not necessarily personal– appreciation. Indeed, one can interpret *The Secret History* as a thrilling commentary on the entitlement of the wealthy without relating to any of the characters or events of the story, nor to Tartt’s writing style. An exercise of taste might be needed for them to understand it, but relating personally to it isn’t necessary.

However, against Page, we could argue that the focus of aesthetic understanding is indeed the pursuit of aesthetic appreciation: when we interpret a work, we (try to) understand in order to appreciate it. The usual purpose of reading is not to, by means of appreciating the work’s aesthetic features, understand it as literature. Rather, we try to understand the novel in hopes of appreciating it. In virtue of this, the relevance of features regarding the work’s meaning and/or content is dependent on the experience and is grounded in whatever grants the most rewarding appreciation possible. For a novel to have meaning is not the same as its being meaningful; the latter is what we usually seek in reading, and it happens only when one somehow connects personally with the work. Hence

the fundamental purpose of interpretation itself: to guide perception toward maximal appreciation and therefore fair evaluation of a work. [...] The best interpretative explanations are those that guide the perceptions of an audience toward maximal appreciation of a work, those that maximize its value for the audience. (Goldman, 2013, p. 41)

In addition to this, if emotional understanding is part of the interpretive process of novels, then some kind of subjective attachment is required, for “the narrative must instill certain concerns about the fictional characters and events in the reader” (Carroll, 2001, 228-229). That is, to attempt an understanding of a work the reader must *care* about it to some extent, and this involves some kind of personal engagement compatible with the ideas of attunement and resonance.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Against Carroll, both Page and Goldman vindicate the aesthetic character of works. Nonetheless, they fall short of emphasizing the qualitative aspect of interpretation as experiential in nature. An experiential approach to ordinary literary interpretation is preferable to an inferential one, given its potential for maximizing the aesthetic experience of literature. The discernment of the work's relevant qualities to then infer how they determine the kind of work it is, or how they constitute its artistic value, can take part in the interpretative process but in no way exhausts it. The role of the exercise of taste in interpretation accounts for the aesthetic dimension of literary appreciation, which is characterized as a search for richness, completeness and value in our experiences of literature and predominantly guides way the reader's interpretive process.

To conclude, there are some ulterior thoughts that reach further than what has been argued for in this paper. Primarily, we can identify the possible reason behind the rejection of the notion of taste and its influence in interpretation whilst also aiming to preserve the normative nature of art interpretation and appreciation. Based on this reasoning, taste is understood as a set of subjective criteria and preferences—i.e. our "aesthetic personality"—whose participation rules out every possibility of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations. However, the normativity of art appreciation is aesthetic; that is, primitive and rule-free, and an alternative notion of taste such as the one endorsed in this paper is perfectly compatible with aesthetic normativity.

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