Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 16 (2003)

Artikel: Real toads and imaginary gardens : Freud and Davidson on meaning and metaphor
Autor: Chodat, Robert
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100006

Nutzungsbedingungen
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation
L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 02.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

Real Toads and Imaginary Gardens: Freud and Davidson on Meaning and Metaphor

Robert Chodat

In one of the most well-known lines from one of her most well-known poems, Marianne Moore once described poetry as building "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This is a strange thing to say, but the very familiarity of the line, I suspect, has distracted us from its strangeness. How could an "imaginary" *somewhere* be said to have "real" *somethings* in it? Moore was not a literary theorist or a philosopher, but I want to suggest here how, in a single line, she formulates what is perhaps *the* major problem plaguing literary study generally: namely the problem of how, if at all, the descriptions we read in so-called literary texts fit into the world of things we refer to as "real." Where should metaphors – which, for reasons I shall be explaining, can be construed here broadly to mean fictive utterances, utterances about some state of affairs not generally recognized as actual – be placed in the geography of our language?

There are, I think, at least a couple of different ways of responding to this question, and, following Moore, I will christen these ways the "Real Toad" response and the "Imaginary Garden" response. And I shall be figuring these two responses through a discussion of two major philosophers of mind: Freud, whose work is ubiquitous in literary studies, and the contemporary American philosopher Donald Davidson, whose work has been central to the development of post-war – some say "post-analytic" – American philosophy, but has been virtually ignored in literary studies. As I shall be suggesting, one advantage of looking at these two figures is not only that they represent usefully contrasting ways of understanding the relation of art and reality, but also that each rightly identifies this relation as a problem about *meaning* – i.e., of what sorts of things mean, how those things get those meanings, and how we as meaning-sensitive creatures understand those meanings. It may ultimately be the case that neither the Freudian Real Toad position nor the Davidsonian Imaginary Garden position are sufficient responses to the com-

plex problem of whether art "relates" to reality; we may need eventually to modify both in order to have a sufficient account of what we do when coping with metaphors. But at their simplest level, they do represent the two poles of a spectrum of responses, so literary studies would do well to spend some time considering them.

First to the Freudian Real Toad position. Most of Freud's interpretive strategies, of course, derive from his effort to diagnose psychosis, and from his earliest work his explanations hinge on his picture of the mind's partitioning into multiple distinctive domains ("conscious" versus "unconscious," etc.). And throughout his work Freud identifies his theory of dreams as the key to accessing these multiple domains: "Whenever I began to have doubts of the correctness of my wavering conclusions, the successful transformation of a senseless and muddled dream into a logical and intelligible mental process in the dreamer would renew my confidence of being on the right track" (*Lectures* 35). Because dreams for Freud allow us some reliable access to the unconscious, comprehending them becomes a first step to understanding irrational behavior. First, he says, comes the "*practical* task" of identifying "the text of the dream or the *manifest* dream," and second comes the "*theoretical* task" of finding "what we are looking for, what we suspect, so to say, of lying behind the dream," "the *latent* dream-thoughts" (*Lectures* 38). Unearthing the latent dream-thoughts – making "logical and intelligible" sense out of the apparently "senseless and muddled" manifest dream – requires not only a recognition of the "copious employment of symbols" in dreams. It requires, furthermore, a recognition that this symbolizing process takes place through the "putting-together" of elements in "condensation," on the one hand, and the process of "dream-distortion," called "displacement," on the other (*Lectures* 49-50).

As we review these basic points, it is important to recall that Freud draws a close analogy between the activity of dreaming and the writing of poetry, hence between the activity of dream interpretation and the interpretation of literary texts.[1] As Lionel Trilling said in an influential essay of the 1940s, Freud can be said to have expanded Vico-like Romantic claims about the

[1] In my occasional uses of them here and elsewhere, the nouns "poetry" and "literature" (or the adjectives "poetic" and "literary") will be given the same definition I stipulated above for "metaphor" – i.e., utterances about some state of affairs that is fictional and not real. Technically speaking, this is misleading. Seen from the Davidson angle I discuss later, "fiction" is a necessary logical category for anything we would call a language, whereas "literary" and "poetic," as I would normally use the terms, are primarily terms of praise, meaning roughly "good writing" (however this goodness is assessed); thus a text can be a "fiction" without being "literary," and vice versa. For the sake of convenience, however, I shall be ignoring these distinctions here.

"metaphorical, imagistic language of the early stages of culture": he tried to show "how, in a scientific age, we still feel and think in figurative formations, and to create, what psychoanalysis is, a science of tropes, of metaphor and its variants, synecdoche and metonymy" (53). In, for example, the 1908 paper "The Relation of the Poet and the Day-Dreamer," the *Dichter*, like the day-dreamer, is described as someone whose latent beliefs and desires are imperfectly satisfied or "released" in reality, and who subsequently seeks to establish some kind of alternative world in which they can be expressed. Thus we have the making of "egocentric stories" in which an author-substitute heroically rescues a drowning man; or, more complexly, psychological novels in which an author's ego is split into "many component-egos," in order to "personify the conflicting trends in their own mental life" (50-51). In doing so, the poet "re-arranges the things of his world in a way that pleases him"; an experience stirs a childhood memory, "which then arouses a wish that finds fulfillment in the work in question," so that "imaginative creation, like day-dreaming," can legitimately be considered "a continuation of and substitute for the play of childhood" (50-51). The only substantial difference between the day-dreamer and poet, on the one hand, and Freud's mental patients, on the other, is that, in the former, the fantasies do not "become over-luxuriant and over-powerful" to the point of "neurosis or psychosis" (49). Emphasizing, as Trilling says, how ideas "are expressed in dreams imagistically by compressing the elements into a unity," Freud "makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind"; he makes the mind "in the greater part of its tendency exactly a poetry-making organ" (52-53), that is, an organ for making what we commonly call metaphors and fictions.

I call this picture of the mind the Real Toad position because it follows from Freud's claims about dreaming and poetry that all statements, regardless of whether they look "literal" or "figurative," are said to pick out *real* things with equal perspicuity. Some of our statements are about things and events in the world that any third-person observer could confirm; this would include statements about (e.g.) tables, chairs, someone's anxious behavior, basketball games, and neural activities in brain tissue. But the things and events described in other kinds of statements – statements that a third-person observer would be inclined to regard as false or absurd, or as the products of delusion or fantasy – are considered to be about things no less "real." To say, for example, that "Tolstoy is a moralizing infant" or "The President is a gorilla" may look false on our ordinary reckoning, but, for the Freudian, they are in fact descriptions of a particular *kind* of reality. They depict what is sometimes referred to as a "psychic reality," namely that of the poet or the

dreamer. And to posit such a reality is ultimately to make an important claim about meaning. For one consequence of Freud's account of dreams and poetry is that there is, in essence, no such thing as *not* making an assertion, no such thing, that is, as not making a claim that one holds to be true about some state of affairs. The claim that the sky is blue could be asserted and win endorsements from most of us. But, from a Freudian view, even "Tolstoy is a moralizing infant" or "The President is a gorilla" should be treated as true assertions of a special kind. Such so-called metaphors may not tell us about the arrangement of things in the world in an ordinary sense: Tolstoy was not *really* an infant when he wrote his famous books, nor are infants capable of much moralizing; and it is doubtful that a gorilla would be elected President. But such statements *do* tell us a lot about the deep realities of the author's psyche, the deep goings-on of his or her secret mental chambers.

In Freud's case, of course, those deep mental goings-on inevitably involve the repression of infantile sexual desires. And it is this sort of *inevitability* that gives the distinctive flavor to criticism written in a Freudian spirit. To be sure, simple-minded Freudian criticism, the kind that excavates the childhood traumas of the author or examines the Oedipal struggles of the characters, is mostly a thing of the past. But the Freudian model of "surface" and "depth," of "manifest dream" and "latent dream-thought," has not died away altogether, at least in literary studies. Wedded to other strategies of interpretation, it has persisted, healthier and more insistent than ever. Thus, for example, one might point to Paul de Man's deconstruction, which strives to identify a poet's "repression" of temporality and contingency, a repression manifesting itself most clearly in symbol, which – unlike the virtuously artificial allegory – fosters the illusion of the Eternal dwelling in the Temporal. Thus, too, one might point to New Historicist readings in which poets "repress" the historical atrocities around them in order to indulge in humanist ideology.[2] In each of these instances, the critic is to the poet as the psychoanalyst is to the patient. That this model should persist in literary and cultural studies may seem odd (or at least in need of explanation) when we consider that much of the most advanced contemporary researchers into mind – e.g., the logicians, A.I. specialists, and others working in cognitive science – have no use for Freud whatsoever. Nevertheless, in its two-tiered view of "reality," Freudianism is the interpretive strategy of choice for a great portion of literary studies: the threatening "depths" excavated by the interpreter reveal "real toads," the true-but-buried intentions "beneath" (behind, beyond,

[2] For a good account of the persistence of Freudian models in literary criticism, see Edmundson.

underneath) the text, which in turn allow us as readers to decipher fully the "surfaces" of sentences, images, and metaphors.

There is more to say about the Real Toad conception of metaphors, but to get there I shall turn now to Davidson, who will represent what I am calling the Imaginary Garden position. The distinction between Davidson and Freud is not absolute in every regard. In fact the two have a lot in common when it comes to philosophical psychology. Davidson, for example, is sympathetic to the Freudian idea that irrational behavior arises from a conflict between different parts of the mind (though, unlike Freud, he has little interest in speculating on how many such parts there may be).[3] But when it comes to meaning and metaphor, Davidson departs from Freud quite drastically. I call his position the Imaginary Garden position because, for Davidson, metaphors do not refer to any Real Toads whatsoever. Indeed, as Davidson provocatively puts it in his essay "What Metaphors Mean," metaphors do not in fact *mean* anything at all – do not mean, that is, in any special sense over and above the ordinary meanings of the sentences. "For the most part I don't disagree" with other theories of "what metaphor accomplishes," says Davidson in characterizing his position, "except that I think it accomplishes more and that what is additional is different in kind" (*Inquiries* 247).

We can begin to understand this "more" that is "different in kind" by looking first at Davidson's comments on the role of meaning and belief in linguistic behavior generally. Imagine encountering a tribe of natives whose language you do not know at all and for which there exists no dictionary. To be in this situation is to be in the position of what Davidson calls that of the "radical interpreter." What must we do to figure out what the native's words mean when – to use an example made famous by W. V .O. Quine, from whom Davidson adapts the idea of radical interpreter – a rabbit runs in front of us and the native exclaims "gavagai"? It is not clear, in such a case, what exactly the expression "gavagai" means: it could of course be interpreted as "there's a rabbit," but it could also be understood as "there's a white thing," or "there's an animal," or "there's a non-detached rabbit leg," or "there's a pink-nosed mammal," or "there's a swift runner," or "there's a creature moving under the eleven o'clock sun," or any number of sentences. So a lot more work, time, and ingenuity will be needed before we know what the native's words mean; we will have to listen to a lot of other related but different utterances (from different speakers, at different times, etc.) before we can grasp the content of "gavagai" with any precision. But however we eventu-

---

[3] On this score, see especially Davidson's "Paradoxes of Irrationality." For a more in-depth discussion of Davidson's thinking in relation to Freud, see Cavell.

ally come to translate the utterance, we will only make progress if we make two important assumptions. First, we will need to assume that the utterance is being made in response to the same stimulus to which we ourselves are responding. We have to assume, for example, that the speaker was not temporarily under a delusion at the moment of the rabbit's stampede or at least that the utterance "gavagai" was not caused by something perceived during a delusion. Similarly, if less fancifully, we have to make certain assumptions about human evolution. We must assume, that is, that the native's sensory apparatus is roughly like our own: she is not naturally capable of perceiving at the micro-structural level, and hence is more likely responding to the rabbit rather than the microbes in its fur. As Davidson would put it, we have to assume that there is for both ourselves and the native a match between the *objects* of belief and the *causes* of the belief; or, as he also puts it, meaning begins in the "triangulation" between two people and a common object. Second, we have to assume something about the speaker's attitude in saying "gavagai," namely that, whatever its content turns out to be, she is making an *assertion*, i.e., she is saying something that she holds to be true. We would not get very far in translating the utterance if the speaker were kidding, being deceptive, pulling a prank, being hyperbolic, or otherwise not asserting what she actually believed to be the case. To be sure, determining these different attitudes is not always easy. But even to begin interpreting we must have, as Davidson puts it, a "presumption in favor of the truth of a belief" ("Coherence" 308). Without this presumption, interpretation through triangulation could not get off the ground, for there would be no clear connection between a speaker's beliefs and the world as we ourselves perceive it.[4]

It is only by building upon these connections between utterances, stimuli, and assumptions that we come to develop a theory of meaning for the native's utterance "gavagai," and eventually for the whole of her language. In the case of metaphor, however, the situation changes. Meaning persists: the noises that a speaker makes are still recognizable and intelligible to us as part of a quasi-institutionalized general linguistic background. My linguistic behavior (the noises I make, the inferences I draw) so frequently converges with yours that the "meanings" of our words, as we call them, are in some important sense non-contextual or autonomous. Thus, for example, we can understand the meaning of a sentence even before we know whether it is

---

[4] My sketch of radical interpretation omits, to say the least, many of the most central – and controversial – features of Davidson's thinking (e.g., the so-called "Principle of Charity"). For the complete Davidsonian picture, see the essays collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* and *Subjective Intersubjective Objective*.

history or fiction: you know the meaning of the sentence "John wore a purple suit to his wedding" whether or not John and his stylish suit actually existed or his wedding actually took place. What is severed in the case of a metaphor is the normal connection between meaning and belief. The connection between the causes and objects of belief, as well as the attitude of believing-true, drop temporarily away. Belief can be said to drop away because, in making a metaphor, the speaker has a different attitude towards his or her words than (as we presume) the speaker who utters "gavagai": the metaphor-maker makes no claims to truth, makes no assertion about whatever is the case. It is for this reason that I refer to Davidson's position as that of the Imaginary Garden. It is also for this reason that, throughout my discussion, I have taken the license of using "metaphor" as a rough equivalent to "fiction": what matters for the Davidsonian is not whether the utterance is sentence-length or story-length, but rather one's *attitude* in making it, one's stance towards one's words. It is a mistake to think of metaphor, says Davidson, "as a form of communication alongside ordinary communication," as a language use that "conveys truths or falsehoods about the world" by making "messages" (*Inquiries* 246). Were belief and truth and falsity in question, we would have to admit that most metaphors are patently false. Indeed, recognizing this intended falsity is one of the first steps in seeing the sentence as a metaphor at all. To read "Tolstoy was a moralizing infant" or "The President is a gorilla" as an assertion, as expressing a belief that one holds to be true, would be a step towards seeing the speaker as irrational, a step we are not inclined to take if everything else about him or her seems coherent and consistent.

What, then, on a Davidsonian account, are we left with in dealing with metaphors? Without questions of truth and belief lingering, the key question for Davidson becomes whether the metaphor has, as he says, "brought something off" (*Inquiries* 245). Another way of putting this is asking whether – given that the words mean what they mean – these often false, frequently absurd sentences have any "use": whether they have any "effects," whether they produce any previously un-thought thoughts in the audience, whether they have made us "attend to some likeness" (*Inquiries* 247), have been able to "alert us to aspects of the world" (*Inquiries* 256), made us "appreciate some fact" never before noticed (*Inquiries* 262). This will probably sound frustratingly vague to many readers, but Davidson's fuzziness here is principled. For there is, as he sees it, no way of predicting what the effects of a metaphor might potentially be; the effects will likely vary from person to person and case to case. The effects of a metaphor, for Davidson, are pri-

marily *psychological*, and psychological processes are not the linguist's domain. Given our vastly different private histories and experiences, the train of associations that could be elicited in each of us by a metaphor are simply too multifarious to have much intersubjective validity. Unlike the case of "ordinary communication," in which some kind of information with an identifiable propositional content is declared to the audience, the contents of the thought initiated by a metaphor will be uncertain, since a metaphor only *suggests* how its vehicle and tenor resemble each other. A poem, says Davidson, may indeed intimate "much that goes beyond the literal meaning of the words." But "intimation," as he also points out, "is not meaning" (*Inquiries* 256).[5]

The Real Toad approach and the Imaginary Garden approach thus represent two radically different conceptions of how to cope with those funny bits of linguistic behavior we call metaphors. On the one view, metaphors have a more or less determinate meaning, and the job of the reader and interpreter is to hunt it out, much in the manner of an analyst trying to track down the latent beliefs lying "underneath" a patient's dreams. Metaphors, that is, are veiled assertions whose propositional content we can ascribe on the basis of some prior theory about the mind (in Freud's case, the primal nature of libidinal drives). On the other view, metaphors belong purely to the domain of pragmatics: they can create an indeterminate range of effects, and can be used in various ways, but there is no particular meaning beyond the words of the actual sentence. How, then, might we assess the two approaches? What might representatives of the two camps say about each other?

The Freudian Real Toadist might raise a couple of different objections to the Davidsonian Imaginary Gardenist. The most significant criticism, I think, would focus on Davidson's claim that metaphors are akin to effects in the natural world. Davidson compares metaphors at one point to a bump on the head (*Inquiries* 263), and at least one well-known Davidsonian has compared metaphors to bird songs we have never before heard.[6] The point of these comparisons is that, like a bump on the head or an unfamiliar bird song, a metaphor will stimulate some change in belief, but, since there is nothing

[5] A brief example here may help clarify Davidson's claims about a metaphor's "effects" being "psychological." A friend recently reported to me that he learned the word "corpulent" in a high school history class, during a discussion of Napoleon, and that every time he now hears "corpulent," he thinks of the portly French emperor. For Davidson, it would be mistaken (he would probably say "psychologistic") for my friend to *define* "corpulent" as having something to do with Napoleon, since the rest of us can use the concept just fine without even knowing who Napoleon was. Much of Davidson's argument against "metaphoric meanings" can be understood along the same lines.

[6] See Rorty's "Unfamiliar Noises."

propositional about these phenomena, the precise effects will vary from person to person. The Freudian might reasonably wonder if these comparisons really capture what happens in metaphorical utterances. Birds, after all, cannot give reasons for their behavior, nor could they say what their songs are about. They simply sing; it is part of their biological hard-wiring. But surely the poet or the creative speaker *can* give reasons for why she uses metaphors. Metaphors exhibit intentionality – that is, they are "about" something – in a way that bird songs and other natural phenomena (lightning bolts, exotic flora, etc.) do not. And surely it is not unreasonable, the Freudian interpreter might continue, to ask what exactly this "aboutness" may be. Is the understanding of a metaphor *really* so unpredictable?

Davidson, however, could raise several serious objections to Real Toadism, and given the prevalence of the latter in literary studies, it is perhaps important that we spend more time considering his arguments. In particular, Davidson would question the ways in which the Freudian interpreter typically goes about seeking reasons "behind" a metaphor. What Davidson does, in effect, is to distinguish between different kinds of language-use, most importantly between the kind of indicative utterances that express a held belief (assertions) and the kind that do not (non-assertions, specifically fictions).[7] These different language-uses do not, obviously, involve different lexicons or syntaxes. And obviously Davidson is not making an empirical point about the prevalence of assertoric over non-assertoric utterances; were we to count and classify all the statements we make on any given day, we may even discover that the latter outnumber the former. Davidson's point is rather a logical one – that it is from the assertoric kind of statements that we begin to make sense of linguistic behavior, since it is there that the convergence between the noises we make and the arrangement of the world is most stable and predictable. But once the connection between our noises and our beliefs has been severed, there is no way of knowing *a priori* what the "point" of a statement might be. Surely a speaker *has* a point, an intention, in using a metaphor or a fiction. But this point or intention could very well vary from case to case; there is no reason to think that different metaphors must always be linked to one particular cause, or even that a single metaphor has the same motive every time it is used. In a famous discussion of malapropisms, Davidson argues that the interpretation of any strange or unfamiliar piece of language requires a theory that is "derived by wit, luck, and wisdom

[7] Davidson is hardly original in making these particular distinctions. Some version of a distinction between assertoric and non-assertoric utterances is a standard feature of all philosophers working after Frege.

from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their points across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely." And for deriving this wit and wisdom, Davidson says quite bluntly, "there are no rules," at least "no rules in any strict sense, as opposed to rough maxims and methodological generalities" ("Nice Derangement" 446). From this perspective, Freudian-style interpretation – whether the repressed reality is libidinal, existential, historical, or something else – is the attempt to apply rules that do not, in any strict sense, apply.

Another way of putting this point is to say that, in ascribing meaning first and foremost to assertoric sentences, Davidson puts the burden of proof on thinkers such as Freud – and in turn on many in literary studies – who want to posit other, alternative kinds of meaning. A Freudian would no doubt grant that metaphors (fictions, dreams, etc.) are not true *in the ordinary sense*. But he will probably go on to say that they are nevertheless *in some sense* true; he might say, for example, that they have a "psychic meaning." In making such an argument, the Freudian would be placing herself in a long tradition of thinkers who posit special kinds of meaning, ones that artworks have but that other kinds of utterances (and typically the straw man here is scientific statements) allegedly do not: e.g., "subjective meaning," "poetic meaning," "artistic meaning," and so on. For the Davidsonian, however, such phrases raise more questions than they answer. How would we know when we had truly grasped a "poetic meaning"? Just as important, how would we know when we had *failed* to grasp it? Are such meanings only relevant to works of art, or are they ever evident in things like newspapers and dinner-time conversation? Such alternative concepts of meaning are dubious, for they fail to provide the stable web of inferences that characterizes anything we would call language, and hence anything we would recognize as thought. If, for example, I know the meaning of the sentence, "The President is a man," then I can place that sentence within an inferential web of related statements: if the President is a man, then he is a mammal; and if the President is a man, then he is not a fish or reptile. "Subjective" or "poetic" or "psychic" meanings, however, simply do not permit the same kind of stable, inter-subjectively valid inferences that assertions permit. With the statement "the President is a gorilla," we might very well infer that the President is somehow brutish or uncivilized. But do we also infer that the President is a vegetarian, or that he thrives chiefly in warm-weather climates, or that his powers of communication are limited to a hundred or so hand gestures?

In conclusion, I will make one last remark about the contrast I have been sketching here between Davidsonian and Freudian understandings of meta-

phor, and this regards the extent to which they could be said to represent two intellectual traditions more generally. For the differences between them are arguably not only those between two thinkers, but also between what could be identified as a continental tradition of hermeneutics on the one hand and an American tradition of interpretive pragmatism on the other. The Freudian's connection to theological traditions of interpretation is relatively clear. The texts under consideration – dreams in the case of Freud, artworks in the case of critics – are treated as symbol-laden sacred texts full of esoteric meanings that only the initiated observer can properly decode. Indeed, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the text that made Freud's reputation and upon which most of his subsequent work was built, reads like nothing so much as the work of a brilliantly perverse biblical scholar; and given the strong historical link between literary study and biblical interpretation,[8] it is perhaps no surprise that Freud has found such a ready audience among academic literary critics. Davidson's position, by contrast, can be said to represent a more purely secular mode of understanding that, though by no means characteristic of American culture generally, is deeply characteristic of the modern American philosophical tradition. The question of whether or not Davidson deserves to be called a "pragmatist" has often been debated,[9] but his reflections upon metaphors and fiction clearly have pragmatic strands. On the one hand, his account is pragmatic in that it is skeptical, nominalist, and deeply deflationary. In essence, it is a refusal to stabilize literary texts by appeal to some mysterious quasi-entities (e.g., "poetic meanings"). On the other hand, and also squarely within the pragmatist tradition, his skepticism is not self-refuting. Metaphors are no less illuminating for being in the domain of pragmatics rather than that of meaning. As Davidson suggests, "the picture of metaphor that emerges when error and confusion are cleared away makes metaphor a more, not a less, interesting phenomenon" (*Inquiries* 246). It is, I think, "a more, not a less, interesting phenomenon" because, in claiming that the understanding of strange talk depends upon "wit, luck, and wisdom," Davidson is applying to language the very point that the classical Pragmatists made about knowledge and action generally: that there are no timeless a priori principles to which a quest for certainty inevitably leads, that there is no final authority to tell us what to believe, and that our only

---

[8] On this historical relationship, see especially Prickett.

[9] This debate is largely a terminological one. Davidson denies the classification, since he associates the term "pragmatism" with Jamesian and Deweyan catch-phrases such as "meaning is use" or "truth is what's good in the way of belief." Rorty, on the other hand, sees pragmatism more broadly as "anti-representationalism," and has been eager to enlist Davidson as a fellow traveler.

guide is our own practical intelligence as it is able to cope successfully with our environment. Seen in this light, Davidson is part of a tradition that insists on the importance of examining confusions on a case-by-case basis, as matters for problem-solving and adaptive behavior, rather than on the basis of special a priori principles or theories learned by specialists: interpretation, so to speak, as kibitzing. It is in this sense that the understanding of metaphors can be said to be not merely an arcane matter of semantics, something of professional concern for marginal figures such as linguists and poets and book reviewers and critics, but rather a site where, in some sense, we are forced to make explicit our own understanding of what it means to be a modern person.

References

Cavell, Marcia. *The Psychoanalytic Mind: From Freud to Philosophy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Davidson, Donald. "Paradoxes of Irrationality." *Philosophical Essays on Freud.* Ed. Richard Wollheim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 289-305.

———. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." Lepore 307-19.

———. "What Metaphors Mean." *Inquiries* 245-64.

———. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

———. *Subjective Intersubjective Objective.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

———. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." Lepore 433-46.

Edmundson, Mark. *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory Lectures.* Ed. and trans. James Strachey. New York: Penguin, 1973. 44-54.

———. "The Relation of the Poet and the Day-Dreamer." *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion.* Ed. Benjamin Nelson. New York: Harper, 1958. 44-54.

Lepore, Ernest, ed. *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

Prickett, Stephen. *Words and* The Word*: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Rorty, Richard. "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor." *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers 1.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 162-72.

Trilling, Lionel. "Freud and Literature." *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society.* New York: Scribner's, 1950. 34-57.