The Value of Reading Fiction

Gerald P. Gleeson

Questions about the value and point of engaging with works of art, literature and music, become more pressing once the *fictional* character of aesthetic experience is acknowledged. In reading novels, for example, we entertain thoughts we know to be untrue, or whose actual truth is, at least, of no concern to us. We engage with these works, we respond to them in numerous ways: we come to pity their heroines, to be excited by the drama, angered at the injustice or moved by the sufferings they portray. Of what value is this engagement with the fictional? Is it, as Colin Radford has argued, fundamentally 'irrational'? Radford notes that there are adults 'who cannot be engaged by what happens in works of fiction', by what is not true, and who presumably miss out on what for others is an irreplaceable pleasure; but, he says, their 'logic is impeccable'.[1] In this article I will seek to show that while aesthetic experience involves a kind of self-deception, it typically does so in a non-deceptive way. I will defend the value of aesthetic fiction by showing how it helps reconcile us to a kind of self-deception that is ineliminable from our lives.

Before developing my account, it may help to note in passing some other ways in which other philosophers might evaluate aesthetic experience. An empiricist may be content to observe that reading a novel is valued for the (sensible) pleasure it brings. A rationalist might value fictional works as imaginative representations of intellectual and moral truths. A Kantian will locate the value of aesthetic beauty in the way it symbolizes morality. Yet other accounts are indebted to contemporary philosophies of language. Paul Ricoeur, for example, claims that works of fiction generate new semantic meanings and provide access to new realms of reality: the world of the text. Ricoeur writes that fictional and poetic discourse 'brings to language a pre-objective world in which we find ourselves already rooted'; by 'pre-objective' he means prior to our conventional classifications and scientific formulations. He values poetic

1 Colin Radford, 'Replies to Three Critics', *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 96–7. Cf. his 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?', *PASS* 44 (1975): 67–93.

fictionalization for its capacity to 're-describe' reality.[2]

I will not delay to assess these various proposals; irrespective of their distinctive merits, they fail to capture a crucial feature of aesthetic and personal experience. This feature, which I will term 'significance', becomes most evident from a consideration of the way meaning is experienced in personal, cultural, religious and aesthetic contexts. Beginning with an informal characterisation of the experience of significant meaning, I will seek to show how it helps to illuminate both metaphorical speech and the value of engaging with works of fiction.

Significant Meaning

Every meaningful phenomenon (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) exemplifies a pattern or structure whose repetition can be perceptually recognized, and in being recognized directs us to 'something' beyond itself, and beyond that field of differentiation against which it stands out. Ritual gestures, facial expressions, works of art, and cultural and aesthetic experiences more widely, just like the sentences of a language, all involve 'meaning' in this sense.

This broad characterisation of the meaningful does not, of course, explain all that needs to be said about meaning in general or linguistic communication in particular. Language—unlike ritual action or facial expression—has a recursive compositional structure which makes it amenable to semantic analysis; semantic structure ensures that individual utterances have a determinant sense relative to the system of language as a whole, and in virtue of which utterances can have propositional content. A theory of linguistic meaning can thus refine the notion of an utterance 'directing us beyond itself': an utterance directs us to 'what it says', to its content or 'sense' within a system of grammatical consequences as given by the theory of linguistic meaning. But linguistic communication involves an experience of what I am calling 'significant meaning' over and above linguistic (or propositional) meaning. 'Significant' or intentional meaning is most evident in cultural and aesthetic contexts, and is not primarily semantic, because it is, in Roger Scruton's phrase, 'immanent in an experience'—of hearing the music, of viewing the painting, of

2 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies in the creation of meaning in language*, tr. Robert Czerby, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, London, 1978, p. 239.

participating in the ritual, of reading a poem, of sharing a joke or metaphor.[3] There could be no theory of what gestures, facial expressions, rituals or works art mean or say comparable to theories of linguistic meaning, for these phenomena lack the requisite semantic structure. Despite its analogy with linguistic meaning, 'significant meaning' is not best modelled in terms of linguistic meaning, whether that is explicated in terms of semantics, pragmatics, speakers' intentions, speech acts, and so on.

The experience of significance in non-linguistic contexts can be seen to involve the two most general features of any experience of meaning noted above. Thus, for example, someone I fall in love with stands out from all other people, and evokes my hopes and desires for relationship. Similarly, when seeing one's national flag, it strikes one as standing out from all other flags and evokes attitudes, feelings and thoughts (positive or negative), probably of one's country, its people and history. And again, in hearing the sadness in the music, my attention is directed beyond the music, which is itself irreducible to physical sounds, to the sadness it expresses.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that just as when a reader feels pity for a character in a novel, so when hearing the sadness in the music, the object of the experience (the character, the sadness) is intentional, it need have no actual existence. Indeed, an experience of significant meaning need involve no intentional object at all: thus, a facial expression may be highly expressive, exhibiting a particular and evocative expression, without there being anything of which it is the expression.[4]

'Significant meaning' is personally evocative because it concerns what something (or someone) *means to me*, or means *to someone*.[5] This kind of meaning is a matter of 'relevance': *certain* people, certain works of art or fiction, particular rituals, gestures, and metaphors, symbols, are 'striking', 'touching', 'evocative' or 'impressive' for certain people and not for others. The 'relevance' one experiences will be reflected in behaviour and speech, and in the selection of, and

3 Cf. Roger Scruton, 'Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45 (1987): 169. I have explored the relationship between semantic meaning and significant meaning in my Ph.D. dissertation *The Significance of Metaphor: A Study of Linguistic and Personal Meaning*, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1989.

4 Scruton, p. 169.

5 Arnold Burms drew my attention to this characterization of 'relevant' meaning, and this article derives largely from suggestions he first made.

attachment to, some facts rather than others.

In the case of linguistic communication, the significant meaning of an utterance does not abolish, but rather presupposes, prior levels of meaningfulness; for instance, a declaration of forgiveness, presupposes its semantic and pragmatic structure, but—*as a declaration of forgiveness*—is not reducible to it. Its effectiveness as a word of forgiveness turns on its being received as such by the recipient. So the distinguishing feature of meaning as relevance is not semantic disquotation (that an utterance *S* means that *p*), but rather the way in which a phenomenon with a certain meaningfulness (e.g. the literal meaning of an utterance, or the colour pattern of one's national flag) comes to possess new relevance or particular significance for someone. When experiencing significance one is taken 'beyond the given', hence, for example, the transitions from understanding the rules of a game to grasping its point, and perhaps wanting to play it, from hearing sounds to hearing a variation on a musical theme, and from understanding what an utterance (literally) says, to appreciating its metaphorical point.

Metaphor as significant

This informal characterisation of the experience of significant meaning may be clarified by considering the significance of metaphorical speech, which will in turn introduce the significance of aesthetic fiction. As I have argued elsewhere, the irreducibility of significant meaning to linguistic meaning accords with Donald Davidson's critique of cognitive theories of metaphor.[6] Davidson, famously and to many minds perversely, has argued that metaphors involve no special cognitive meaning beyond what their words literally say and mean. When we speak metaphorically, we *use* words and utterances in order to achieve various effects. Those effects—prompting comparisons, triggering images and moods, evoking emotions—are *not explained* by postulating special linguistic meanings (whether semantic or pragmatic); the effects, rather, explain our temptation to make such postulations. Just as a successful metaphor is not explained by its possessing some special linguistic meaning, so, I will argue, the value of fictional works is not to be explained by their possessing special meaning or reference. Davidson's austere account

6 G. P. Gleeson, 'The Linguistic and Personal Meaning of Metaphorical Speech', *Literature and Aesthetics* 1 (1991): 60–81.

of literal meaning opens the way for a deeper explanation of metaphor in terms of its 'significance' for those speakers who find it appealing and striking. What from Davidson's viewpoint is simply an 'effect' of an utterance, can be more adequately portrayed in terms of the experience of significance: a 'striking' utterance is valued by a speech community in the way that symbols, emblems and totems are valued as a focus of unity and common attachment. This is why, as David Cooper has argued, the all pervasive, social function of metaphorical speech is to 'cultivate the intimacy' of a speech community.[7]

Chief features of significance

The experience of significant meaning may be analysed in terms of three aspects. First, although the experience is typically initiated by another (by a speaker, author, artist), it is fundamentally *passive*: one is *struck* by the meaningful, by the symbol, the gesture, the tone of voice, the face of another, the story, the music, etc. (Accordingly, the experience is never entirely within one's control—it may cease to be striking; one falls out of love, the impact of the music wanes, and so on).

Secondly, despite this passivity, the experience evokes *reciprocity*. Whatever initiates the experience (a symbol, an utterance, a work of art) thereby evokes the need for a response which is both faithful and striking in its turn: 'faithful', in as much as it manifests recognition of the initiative,[8] 'striking', in that it is not merely a recognition of the initiative, but a response in its own right, with its own evocation of significance. 'Responses' in this sense will include declarations of forgiveness, gestures such as standing for the national anthem, expressions of love, works of literary and artistic criticism, and so on.

The 'response' will differ somewhat from the original utterance, differ enough for it to be clear that the initiator of significance has been taken seriously and is receiving a significant (not a 'mechanical') response. The response may well clarify the first utterance, or set it in a new context; it will often be its requisite completion—the

7 David E. Cooper, *Metaphor*, Oxford, 1986.

8 The idiom of 'making' confessions, declarations, etc. is suggestive of the point I am arguing-- that the significance of these utterances transcends the individual speaker, he does something which constitutes the realization (the 'making') of something more than itself, and is not entirely within his control.

acceptance of an apology, *forgiveness* after confession, and so on. As a completing *personal response* it will never be mere repetition. Moreover, the response is not something the initiator could make entirely its own. Neutral information, e.g. the answer to a question, is public property and could as well be uttered and passed on by its recipient. The acceptance of an apology (or a work of literary appreciation), however, remains tied to the respondent as *his or her* faithful addition' to what initiated it. This structure of the 'faithful addition' is of the essence of meaning as significance. Accordingly, the *significant* meaning of an utterance or gesture is not given by some other sentence (as on the disquotational model: *S* means that *p*), but is exhibited through a response, through 'uptake' which carries the original significance further, and seeks response in its turn.

It follows that in 'personal speech' (and, indeed, in all speech in so far as it involves this 'personal' aspect), one cannot know in advance that a relationship will sustain the significance sought, or that one's utterance will be received as embodying it. Personal speech involves the risk of a speaker identifying with 'what she says', an utterance with an independent semantic content, context-free and as such neither unique to the speaker, nor beyond contamination by circumstances outside her control.

Furthermore, personal speech is not 'successful' because the words uttered are adequate to the significance sought and found. 'Success' resides simply in speakers continuing to be struck by their words, finding them apt. In their shared sensibility they 'are in touch with each other'. *Significance resides in mutual attachment* to what might just as easily not embody it.

Thirdly, therefore, significant meaning is inherently '*suspended*' or vulnerable, as it awaits the free response of an other, a faithful but striking response which, like the initial utterance, is in turn exposed to danger. This suspension cannot be avoided, for any definitive, invulnerable response would be either no longer contingent on the initial utterance, or wholly necessitated by it. If I will be forgiven no matter what I say or do, I cease to matter; if my 'apology' is sure to extract forgiveness, then 'forgiveness' is no longer what I receive.

Furthermore, the inherent vulnerability of significance also derives from the fact that it is always possible for us *actively* to take distance from our experiences of significance, to reflect 'objectively' on the fact that we are impressed by some utterance or gesture, by some person or symbol, thereby loosening its captivation. We can take steps to protect expressions of significance, for example by laws

against blasphemy or against mistreating the national flag, yet these steps are themselves precarious, and in turn invoke a context of significance.

This 'structural suspension' of significant meaning finds its historical analogue in the vulnerability of personal existence to separation, loss and death, and further takes the experience of significant meaning beyond the comprehension of those involved. There results a tension not easily sustained: the tension between wanting, yet being unable, to know what we mean to each other. The meaning of human existence consists, it seems, in both living with the suspension of significance, and living with our inability to live with it (for an *invulnerable* attitude towards this suspension itself would be no solution).[9] Consequently, death has an ambivalent meaning for us. It provides a certain *completion* of personal meaning, rounding-off one's life, making it a more comprehensible life, placed perhaps in 'a conciliatory light'.[10] Through death, especially a well-timed death, one's life may acquire a pleasing wholeness. Nevertheless, even if neither untimely nor painful, death only 'completes' the meaning of an individual's life by also abolishing all further possibilities of meaning for him or her. One's personal meaning becomes comprehensible at the price of its abolition, despite any new 'wholeness' it acquires for those who survive and mourn.[11]

It is this suspension or vulnerability of significant meaning which is the key to understanding the value of works of art, and fiction in particular. Art, I will argue, may be understood as a 'consoling idealization' by which we are helped to live with the vulnerability of significance.

Art as idealization of significance

I have identified various contexts in which we naturally speak of

9 This formulation, and much of the preceding discussion, has been influenced by Paul Moyaert's lectures on Sartre and Lacan (Leuven, 1988–9).

10 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, with Heikki Nyman, tr. Peter Winch, Oxford, 1974, p. 46. [Hereafter *CV*.] Of course there are also more complex questions whether events after one's death can alter the meaning of one's life.

11 It follows that total human extinction would, in addition, make impossible any completing transformation of personal significance through the mourning of others. Jacques Derrida, I believe, has expressed such thoughts about the consequences of nuclear holocaust.

meaning as 'significance'. Because it is tied to the experience which evokes it, significance defies exhaustive transparent description. Yet, the connection with linguistic meaning is both inevitable and appropriate, and it is in the light of the transparent paradigm of semantic disquotation that significance is, by contrast, aptly described as 'vulnerable', as lacking the wholeness of comprehensible reciprocation, as defying definitive completion. This vulnerability is essential: if ever the 'right words' could be found (as an expression of one's love, as definitive literary criticism) significance would be exhausted. Yet the experience of significance continues to seek an adequate and complete reciprocation. We must sustain our experiences of significance (i.e. treat them as relatively invulnerable), while yet recognising that their vulnerability is ineliminable.[12] Living with this dilemma requires 'consolation' not elimination.

Consolation is sought in situations of *loss*: it may promise the restoration of what has been lost (I am consoled at the thought that someone has found the wallet I misplaced), or may simply console without promise of restoration (on the death of a loved one, I may be consoled simply by the presence of a friend who has experienced the same loss). In the latter case, we might speak of 'pure consolation', unmixed with actual recompense or practical gain. Since this vulnerability or absence of stability is inherent in significance, it would seem that only a 'pure' consolation could appropriately respond to it. Art (like religion), I will suggest, may be viewed as 'pure consolation'.[13]

What then is 'consoling' about a work of art from the viewpoint of significant meaning? Simply, that it may present itself to us as a limited, though *complete* whole, at once both striking and faithful. A portrait, for instance, must be faithful to its subject—recognizably a portrayal of someone—and yet strikingly expressive and representational. A successful novel about life in Victorian England will strike us as true to life (rather than fact), and yet be neither predictable nor banal. The stylized dialogue of great drama is, perhaps, the most obvious example of personal speech attaining its ideal of reciprocal identifications. More generally, in so far as the representational and expressive features of art works discipline our

12 The echoes here of Lacan will be evident to those familiar with his work: we must live with a situation with which we cannot live, and live with our inability to live with it.

13 Though religious traditions which also promise 'eternal life' might be said to proffer a 'mixed' consolation.

imaginative response to them, we are delighted and consoled by the recognisable fusion of form and content—of 'content' which has found its 'strikingly faithful', formal embodiment, seemingly 'adequate' to its subject matter. Within the work, significance is no longer suspended, no longer inherently unstable, as it is in personal speech. Within the (limited) totality of the work, the significance of its various details are constrained. The work is thus more resistant to material and contextual contamination than is the personal speech of actual life.

A work of art is, of course, a *limited* whole. Its fictionalization ensures a circumscribing of details—by contrast to the indefinite array of facts about actual lives. Its 'framing-off' as a limited whole 'condenses' its significance within itself, precluding innumerable (possibly fantastic) connections with literal truth ('what was Macbeth's birthday'?). The work of art always directs us back to the details of the object itself. Within the experience of this limited whole significance becomes, if only fleetingly, comprehensible to us; where 'real life' exacts death or the complete loss of meaning as the price for our glimpses of wholeness, aesthetic experience offers an analogue for the comprehension of significance exempt from that demand. (This notion of a limited whole recalls Wittgenstein's remark about the 'mystical'.)

The inseparability of form and content, the incorporation of a 'faithful addition' within itself as a limited whole, and the relative stability of its significance: when art is understood to involve these features, it can be said to involve an 'idealization' of the personal significance characteristic of human existence. Ted Cohen approaches a similar thought from a different perspective. He remarks of jokes, metaphors and works of art:

> We find ourselves reflected in a surface which mirrors our dearest and perhaps most human hope: to do well, but not under compulsion.[14]

'To do well'—that is, to be faithful; 'not under compulsion'—that is, with the striking freedom of a response which could not have been manipulated or anticipated, and yet which is utterly appropriate. In appreciating a great work of art, in engaging with its fictional world, we perceive a kind of 'necessity' intrinsic to it—just *these* colours, just *that* variation on the theme, *this* rhyme and rhythm, just *that* unfolding of plot and character. As Wittgenstein remarks, we are

14 Ted Cohen, 'Jokes', in ed. Eva Schaper, *Pleasure, Preference and Value* Cambridge, 1983, p. 136.

tempted to locate this 'necessity' in some reality apart from the actual work and to which it aims to correspond. When a musical theme, for instance, seems to demand that a phrase be repeated if the work is to realize its power, we can have the impression that in so doing the theme is conforming to some real exemplar.

> Yet there just is no paradigm apart from the theme itself. And yet again there is a paradigm apart from the theme: namely, the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling. (*CV*, 52)

The necessities we discern in a work of art 'mirror' paradigms within ourselves—'paradigms' of sensibility, language, practice, relationship and significance—which constitute human existence, as *significant and intentional existence.*

Aesthetically, the death of a *style* (whether of art or living) is typically the result of its final and most perfect realization as a limited whole.[15] But human lives do not normally acquire this degree of perfect stylization. If at times they begin to approach it, we become rightly alarmed. Not surprisingly, in such instances we might resort to aesthetic metaphors, to images of the well-ordered significance of fiction. One of Chesterton's characters has the following experience when approaching a large English country estate by night.

> More pines, more pathway slid past him, and then he stood rooted as by a blast of magic. It is vain to say that he felt as if he had got into a dream: but this time he felt quite certain that he had got into a book. For we human beings are used to inappropriate things; we are accustomed to the clatter of the incongruous; it is a tune to which we can go to sleep. If one appropriate thing happens, it wakes us like the pang of a perfect chord. Something happened such as would have happened in such a place in a forgotten tale.
>
> Over the black pinewood came flying and flashing in the moon a naked sword ...[16]

To think one 'has got into a book' is to find one's actual life taking on the planned significance of an artistic work; it is to glimpse one's life as a limited whole from a transcendental vantage-point. To find one's life reflected in 'a perfect chord' also evokes the 'pang', the desolation of death which accompanies the perfection of significance. At this point we are reminded of outstanding works of biography, through which a person's life 'gets into a book'; the

15 It may also result from the loss or the contamination of the *material* circumstances it presupposes.

16 G. K. Chesterton, 'The Strange Crime of John Boulnois', in *Father Brown—Selected Stories*, introd. Ronald Knox, London, 1987, p. 227

selection and circumscribing of details—clearly a kind of fictionalization makes their life 'complete', a relatively comprehensible, or 'significant', 'limited whole'.

Self-deception and aesthetic experience

What then is the value of art, with its *fictional* realization of completed significance? Is it irrational self-delusion to take so seriously the limited completions of aesthetic works? There is obviously some self-deception involved in entertaining and allowing oneself to be engaged by fictional thoughts, or in thinking that just this biography expresses someone's life. If these thoughts were just 'quasi-beliefs', isolated from the rest of our lives, then, like daydreams, fantasies and private superstitions, they might be a relatively harmless escape from some of the tensions of life, self-indulgent deceptions providing emotional relaxation. No doubt some fiction is approached in this way, and presumably some kinds of fiction lend themselves to this attitude—cheap thrillers, Mills and Boon romances, horror movies.

But clearly there is much more to great art, to significant fiction, which disciplines our imaginative responses. Although an aesthetic object seeks to realise the reciprocity of significance within itself, it seeks in addition a response from those who attend to it: a response that will in turn be 'faithful' but 'striking'. We can think here of some of the masterpieces of literary criticism, which themselves become touchstones for further criticism. These responses acknowledge and sustain the significance of the original.

Furthermore, great works of fiction are not isolated from real life; they resist attempts at escapist exploitation. Some authors try to explain this 'reality-connection' of great fiction in terms of the special reference of works of fiction ('to the world of the text') or, in Ricoeur's words, to our 'primordial belonging' to the world. My proposal, by contrast, is that the link between fiction and life resides in a certain kind of self-deception that is common to both.

We have seen how the structure of significant meaning which constitutes personal existence ensures that speakers can never fully grasp, or control, their significance for each other. Experiences of significance involve a certain *passivity*, a 'being-struck-by', precisely because they are not within the intentional control of subjects. Furthermore, every expression of significance is inherently precarious—changes in material circumstances or in perspective may

evacuate the 'striking significance' of an utterance or gesture. There can be no guarantee that one will continue to be struck by it.

The experience of significance involves a basic self-deception, for while we continue to find something significant we (necessarily) overlook its possible loss of significance. Consequently, one aspect of the 'idealization' of significant meaning that we inevitably postulate is that it be free from the possibility of contamination or loss of significance. In reflecting on these changes in significance *for us*, we envision the need for an 'external model', an absolute and non-contingent guarantee of significance, an 'impartial observer', perhaps, for whom the true, *unchanging* significance of persons and things is known. For this observer, significance could never be lost or contaminated. However, this idealization conflicts with the 'suspension' of significance explained previously. The 'transcendental truth' is that there is no ultimate, privileged viewpoint—what is striking (significant) from one viewpoint is not from another. That is to say, every viewpoint is deceptive in as much as (while captivating) it strikes us definitive and non-deceptive.

The question arises of how we are to relate to this precariously shifting, 'suspended', realm of significance. To try to relate to it 'directly' would require us, either to explicitly declare all significance deceptive, thereby leaving us with a 'god's-eye', but 'neutral' and *non-significant* view of personal existence; or, if our relation to significance is to remain evocative, to maintain the illusion by simply adopting yet another unstable, and deceptive, view of it.

A more satisfactory, 'indirect', approach to the shifting of significance would try to combine the experience of significance with a recognition of its instability and 'suspension'. Some of Heidegger's late remarks on poetic language adumbrate the 'indirect' approach.[17] He located the truthfulness of poetic language (e.g. of Hölderlin's lines about words as 'flowers') in the fact that it discloses that it is disclosure, as opposed to technological language, for example, which conceals the fact that it presents the mystery of Being in only one of the ways in which it can be revealed. For Heidegger, every disclosure of Being is also a concealment. Heidegger's remarks about Being can be applied to what is here called significance: every experience of significance, while it lasts, conceals the possibilities of different significance (every rude word may become ridiculous; every sacred

17 Cf. Cooper, pp. 251–7, with reference to Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, tr. Peter D. Hertz, Harper & Row, 1971.

symbol may become profane or secular, every poem may become 'unreadable', every melody contaminated by its use in a cigarette advertisement).

The 'Heideggerian' suggestion is that poetic language discloses Being, *and* discloses that its words are disclosive (and thereby concealing as well). Similarly, the fictionalization of works of art embodies significance, while also embodying an explicit recognition that this significance is fictional (an illusion). Fiction can thus remind us that all experiences of significance are unstable, and—in so far as they conceal this—deceptive, but it does so in and through an experience of significance (of the work of art as a limited whole). Recognition of the fiction involved is crucial to aesthetic experience; to this extent, 'reality' intrudes upon us. To mistake the portrait for its subject, or mistake fiction for historical narrative, is to misunderstand the work. In understanding that we are reading fiction, we at the same time recognize its deceptive character, like the deceptive character of all experiences of significance.

To ensure this recognition occurs, a novelist will often heighten the tension with reality by trying to destroy her fiction—implying the events actually occurred, or that the heroine died shortly after the novel was written, or by referring in the story to historical persons and events, or by imposing her own remarks as author, rather than fictional narrator, or by providing *two* endings to a novel, and so on. These effects set up a tension between the fictional and the real. Because reality intrudes the reader may become unsure what is fiction, what is fact. But the author's aim is not deception or confusion for its own sake. She gives the reader glimpses of actual life taking on a comprehensible significance ('getting into a book'), but a significance whose instability is all too apparent precisely because the reader knows it is fictional. In so far as the novelist reveals her own hand in the fiction she is creating, the reader may have a sense of disillusionment—'it's only a story', whereas he had hoped, if only for a time, that the significance embodied in the fiction might be realized in life (that 'life could be like this'). Yet, it is the lucid, non-delusory self-deception of fiction which separates it from the private, secret self-deceptions of fantasy and day-dreaming. These latter cannot survive the lucidity which good fiction encourages, even as it delights and disciplines our imaginative involvement with a work.

The value of fiction is, accordingly, that it provides one important way of allowing the self-deception that significant meaning makes

unavoidable to come indirectly, but lucidly, before our consciousness. It thus provides a 'revelation', not of a new reality, but of our inescapable relationship to the vulnerable and 'suspended' significance of all reality. Moreover, it does so from within an *experience* of significance—of aesthetic meaning, re- presentation and expression which is itself vulnerable and 'suspended'. It is not derogatory to describe a fiction's significance as *consoling,* for it clearly remains a 'suspended' consolation. It would not be 'more rational' to abandon the consolations of fiction, since to do so would presuppose the fixed 'invulnerable' attitude towards significance which, as noted above, constitutes its death. The value of aesthetic fiction is that it both enhances our experience of significance while yet preserving the significance of our relationship to it. In short, as one critic remarks in the light of Auden's poem 'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning':

> Art acknowledges man's lying nature by at least lying openly and insisting on its own artificiality, playfulness and exaggeration.[18]

Gerald Gleeson, B. Theol., M.A. (Cantab.), Ph.D. (Leuven), teaches philosophy at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and has a special interest in aesthetics. This paper was read at the October 1991 colloquium of the Society.

18 Daphne Turner, 'Delight and Truth: Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*', *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3 (1989): 105.