So How Many Children *Did* Lady Macbeth Have? Syntagmatic Theory and the Construal of Fictional Worlds

Richard Harland

I

My title comes, of course, from L. C. Knights' famous article: 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?'. The particular question as to the number of Lady Macbeth's children had arisen in nineteenth-century Shakespearean criticism because Lady Macbeth talks of having 'given suck', yet there is no mention of any living male child who might follow Macbeth onto the throne of Scotland. However, Knights never really addresses this particular question in his article—and it will not be addressed in the present paper either. Like Knights, I shall take 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' as the name of a much more general question in literary criticism: the question of whether characters in fiction can be treated as real, independent people. Knights quotes from one typical nineteenth-century critic: 'We always behold the portrait of living nature [in Shakespeare] and find ourselves surrounded with our fellows'. Not unreasonably, Knights reacts against this total equation of real life and verse drama. And yet it is worth remembering that Queen Elizabeth herself evidently saw the character of Falstaff as larger than any existing presentation when she commanded the writing of a play in which the fat knight should be shown falling in love. If such responses are excessive, yet they are nonetheless prompted as genuine effects of fictional creation. It is the purpose of this paper to explain how such effects can occur. In what follows, I shall be looking at fictional phenomena of all kinds, places and events as well as characters; and I shall be looking at fictional phenomena in fictions of all kinds, especially novels.

The general tendency of twentieth-century literary criticism has been to emphasize words at the expense of world. Knights of course represents the viewpoint of the New Critics (in a broad application of that term); as an alternative to real life characters, he puts forward the language and poetic imagery of Shakespeare's plays. Poststructuralist literary critics go even further in the same direction, meditating upon

the language of the text and regarding characters, places and events as some kind of mirage created by bourgeois realism. But such approaches are founded upon the special nature of Modernist and Postmodernist literature, and governed by certain limiting assumptions as to how language actually works. Given these assumptions, the truism that words are our only evidence leads inevitably to modes of interpretation which remain on or near the level of single words—to New Critical structures of image and symbol, or Poststructuralist paradoxes of opposition and identity. It is as though the detective were to arrest the fingerprint. Syntagmatic theory challenges these assumptions in relation to language generally, and throws open a whole new way of looking at fiction specifically.

II

Syntagmatic theory differs from Structuralist and Poststructuralist approaches to language in that it is not concerned with what individual words imply across *langue* ; and it differs from twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophies of language in that it is not concerned with how sentences apply to or are used in our own actual world. As argued in my book, *Beyond Superstructuralism,* syntagmatic theory is concerned with what happens to meaning in the transition from individual words to sentences. This has not appeared as a problem to most twentieth-century theorists. They have drastically challenged old commonsensical ideas about language in other respects, but they have never exactly challenged the old commonsensical idea of how word-meanings combine together.[1] The assumption has remained that a combination of word-meanings works in much the same way as any other combination—which is also to say, in much the same way as a combination of physical signifiers on a page. In *Beyond Superstructuralism,* I characterized this as a bricks-and-wall view of the relation between individual words and sentences. One brick of word-meaning is cemented into place next to another, next to another, next to another, until the total conglomerate forms a completed wall of sentence-meaning. It might be suggested that if theorists had seen through the fundamental inadequacy of this view, they might have found it unnecessary to abandon commonsensical views so drastically in other respects.

To begin with a minimal combination: consider the way in which the adjective 'black' combines with the noun 'horse'. By itself, 'horse' specifies no particular colour, leaves colour free to vary. The ordinary range of the word's meaning allows for brown, black, grey, dappled,

etc. But when 'black' intersects with 'horse', the possibilities are cut down. The adjective specifies what the noun leaves open. Conversely, we could envisage the meaning of 'black' in terms of all sorts of things that are black in different ways; but the possibilities are cut down by intersection with the word 'horse'. Together, the two words help close off each other's openness. And the concept of intersection is crucial here. The meaning of a noun and the meaning of an adjective are not full entities like bricks, which can be simply cemented together. Rather we should think of a 'noun-slice' and an 'adjective-slice' converging over the same ground—different perspectives on the same scene, as it were. The two words are not merely conjoined but *fused* under a process of synthesis.

The remarkable thing about such synthesis is that it is subtractive. The meaning of 'black horse' is not the meaning of 'black' plus the meaning of 'horse', but only so much of the meaning of 'black' as is compatible with the meaning of 'horse', only so much of the meaning of 'horse' as is compatible with the meaning of 'black'. Rejecting the bricks-and-wall version of how words combine in *Beyond Superstructuralism*, I proposed the alternative analogy of superimposed colour filters. One filters or blocks light waves of a certain frequency, another blocks light waves of another frequency—and what comes out at the end is only so much light as can manage to pass through all of the filters simultaneously. Similarly, what comes out at the end of a phrase—or a clause, or a sentence—is only so much meaning as can manage to pass through all of the word-meanings simultaneously. Paradoxically perhaps, the meaning of words combined is narrower and more specific than the meanings of those same words considered individually. In this sense, we put words together in order to produce *less* meaning.

The analogy with superimposed colour filters also serves to demonstrate a further point. For the light which passes through the filters evidently comes from an outside source and not from the filters themselves. An outside source is similarly required for language; and here it is the thinking subject who supplies the potential for meaning which individual word-meanings cut down and specify. As always, subtractive synthesis depends upon active creative effort. And this applies no less on the side of reception than on the side of utterance. To understand a novel, we must ourselves bring something to the reading. But it is important to note that we make our contribution at the stage of input rather than at the stage of output. This is not a freedom to develop our own meanings after and around the word-

meanings given, as in Poststructuralist theory. Unlike the proliferative Poststructuralist version of creativity, the reader's creativity in syntagmatic theory is controlled and directed towards *re*-creation.

Syntagmatic creativity is most obviously called for in dealing with combinations like 'a short basketballer'. There can be no question of adding the meaning of 'short' to the meaning of 'basketballer' when the adjective is used syncategorematically. Even if we could think the ordinary range of cases of 'short', yet that range still would not intersect with 'basketballer'—since basketballers are all, by any ordinary standards, tall. Memories of past encounters with the word 'short' will not suffice here, nor can we appeal to some social category with pre-established boundaries in *langue.* Instead we must *re-think* the spectrum of short versus tall specifically in relation to basketballers. By an effort of creative—albeit subliminal—mental activity, we come to an understanding of 'a short basketballer' which still allows for someone six foot tall or more. Such a meaning comes into existence *only* on the level of combination, it does not exist on the level of individual word-meanings.

Here is another example, borrowed from Ray Jackendoff.[2] Given the sentence 'The light flashed', we naturally understand that the light flashed one time only; and similarly with such sentences as 'The light flashed above the trees', 'The light flashed in her eyes'. But if we read 'The light flashed until dawn', we take it that the flashing was repeated, over and over again. As Jackendoff points out, this sense of repetition is not supplied by the meaning of the prepositional phrase 'until dawn'—after all, sleeping is not a repeated activity in 'Bill slept until dawn'. The sense of repetition is not determined by any individual word-meaning but emerges only at the level of combination. To put it briefly: 'until dawn' sets a temporal boundary on an event extended over time; but 'flash' in the most usual sense is already complete and bounded as an event in time. Since we have to make the two components intersect over the same ground, we have to find for 'flash' an unbounded sense which can be bounded by 'until dawn'—in effect, the less usual sense of a repeated flashing which can continue indefinitely. Jackendoff's analysis appeals to the necessary complementarity between different grammatical 'slices': a prepositional phrase supplies what a verb lacks, and *vice versa.*

Such examples are exceptional only in making exceptionally obvious what takes place everywhere in language. At every stage of combination within a sentence, meaning changes level drastically, dramatically. We might envisage these changes of level by thinking

of individual word-meanings as the *markers* for meaning on higher levels. For higher-level meaning is not *contained* in words, and can not be understood simply by gathering in meaning after meaning handed across in word after word. Rather we should think of individual word-meanings as marking out the passage which a higher-level meaning must take, as laying out that particular set of elements over which a higher-level meaning must fit. Individual word-meanins define the shape of something invisible, something which does not directly appear on the page at all. Or to put it another way: what matters most in a sentence is not what's *in* but what's *between* the words. And this applies not only to language used in communication but also to the verbal notes one jots down as a personal *aide-memoire.* The notes do not embody one's thought in solid form, they merely serve as a means for recovering it. Or to put it another way again: individual word-meanings merely supply the evidence for an inference.[3]

It follows, of course, that the correctness of higher-level meanings can never be guaranteed. Our inferences necessarily rely upon a criterion of *simplicity*; we look for that thought which takes the shortest possible passage compatible with the individual word meanings. (Just as we look for the simplest *gestalt* compatible with the visual data when presented with an incomplete drawing or suggestive pattern of dots.) Using such a criterion, we can never be absolutely certain that we have discovered or recovered *the* meaning. But then absolute certainty is hardly something that we have any right to expect or demand in our dealings with language. That syntagmatic theory can provide only a probabilistic justification for any particular higher-order meaning makes it, I suggest, *more* rather than *less* descriptively adequate to the facts of language.

Processes of synthesis build between individual word-meanings, and between meanings already built between individual word-meanings, all the way up to the sentence. Of course, different processes are required to combine further different parts of speech and to combine different kinds of phrase and clause: such complications are at least partially explained in *Beyond Superstructuralism.* Here, though, I shall take them as read, returning to the syntagmatic story at the level of whole sentences. For the sentence represents a natural watershed, where meaning is on a par with the reality that we know from non-linguistic sources. This is the level at which meaning becomes declarative, interrogative or imperative, the level at which meaning can be inserted into our own actual world (if we so choose) by statements, questions or commands. However, processes of

synthesis are not limited within the scope of the single sentence, but continue to build, albeit in a new way, between sentences and clusters of sentences.

Consider the following pair of sentences:

> The light flashed in her face. She gave a cry and tried to run.

To take these sentence as presenting separate events would be to miss the whole point. Not only do we identify the 'she' with the owner of the face, we also see the cry and attempt to run as a causal consequence of the light being flashed. Thus combined, the two events are not merely added together but become stages or moments in a single larger sequence of action. Yet nothing in either sentence directly informs us of the consequentiality involved; perforce we must work it out for ourselves. It seems that in reading we are always looking to discover as much higher-level meaning or 'point' as is compatible with the evidence. Which is also to say that such higher-level meaning or 'point' is not actually *contained within* the evidence.

Or consider a more complex example:

> The light flashed until dawn. They could see the signal from their observation post. Someone was lost in the hills. But it was impossible to send out a search party at night. There were hidden bogs and crevasses everywhere in that direction.

Here we must work out that 'the signal' *is* the flashing light, that '[s]omeone was lost' is the meaning attributed to the signal, and (looping back around) that if the someone-lost is located 'in the hills', it is because the light itself is flashing in the hills. Then we must understand the causal connection between someone-lost and sending out a search party, and must make the assumption that sending out a search party is in some way the responsibility of the 'they' in the observation post. Finally, we must infer that 'that direction' is the direction of the flashing light/someone-lost, and that the 'bogs and crevasses' are the reason why sending out a search party is 'impossible'—specifically because low visibility 'at night' dangerously multiplies the already low visibility of what's 'hidden'. Such are the (more obvious) identities and dependencies which we read into the passage, identities and dependencies which are never handed across 'in so many words' but which exist in the gaps *between* sentences— and the gaps between non-contiguous as well as contiguous sentences. Of course, inter-sentence connectives may help. In this passage, the 'But' at the start of the fourth sentence helps us to understand the complicated connection which holds not simply between someone-

lost and sending out a search party, but between someone-lost and *failing to* send out a search party. Still, we would surely manage to infer the connection even if the 'But' were omitted (as might well happen if the fourth sentence began a new paragraph, for example). As I have argued at greater length in *Beyond Superstructuralism,* inter-sentence connectives can only *help,* they can never actually *hand across* higher-level meanings. In the last analysis, the recognition of such meanings is always up-to-us.

What's interesting here is that the higher-level meanings formed by connection above the level of the sentence are no longer dependent upon specifically *linguistic* principles. As I said, a watershed has been passed. Within the sentence, meanings are combined largely under the compulsion of syntactical rules; between sentences, the role of syntactical rules largely dwindles away.[4] The principles under which we combine 'The light flashed in her face' and 'She gave a cry and tried to run' are universal principles of synthesis. If a movie presents us with a shot of a light flashing in a woman's face, followed by a shot of a woman (seen full-length with face averted) giving a cry and trying to run, we shall connect the two shots just as we connect the two sentences, under essentially the same principles of identity and causal consequentiality. Or suppose we are visitors at an observation post. Even if the people at the post speak an unintelligible language, we may still be able to guess their interpretation of a light flashing repeatedly through the night. And if we have made an earlier daylight inspection of the dangerous terrain over in that direction, we may be able to deduce why they are unwilling to send out an immediate search party. Such understandings are involved in making sense of all kinds of experience; there is nothing uniquely linguistic about them when they are also used in making sense of language above the level of the sentence.

III

If syntagmatic theory is correct, it is no longer paradoxical that we can claim to remember a novel even though we can't remember a single particular line of words. In a single-level theory of language, the mere accumulation or agglomeration of words can never pass beyond the manner in which individual word-meaning exists. But in a multiple-level theory, the manner in which meaning exists is transformed from level to level, even as individual word-meanings remain the only ultimate source of evidence. On higher levels of meaning, fictional people, places and events exist in a manner

inconceivable at the level of individual word-meanings, a manner which bears comparison with the independent objective status of real people, places and events. In this respect, the critic *is* entitled to apply to fictional worlds the same kind of discourse which we use for the real world. But the critic is not entitled to disregard the only ultimate source of evidence in individual word-meanings. It is not a matter of opting for people, places and events as an *alternative* to words; it is a matter of recognising the immense span of transformation upon transformation by which the one level relates to the other. In syntagmatic theory, fictional people, place and events are neither assimilated to nor disconnected from individual word-meanings; rather, the connection to individual word-meanings takes place across a very great distance.

It is because fictional people, places and events exist in a manner which bears comparison with the independent objective status of real people, places and events, that fictional people, places and events do not cease to exist the moment they are no longer presented in the particular word or phrase or sentence or paragraph that we are actually reading. To the extent that they are construed *between* words, they are also construed *beyond* words. In Chapter 3 of *Wuthering Heights,* Lockwood mentions the chapel or kirk, with its roof still intact; at the end of the book, in a journal entry written seven months later, we are told that many of the windows show black gaps deprived of glass, and that the slates of the roof are jutting off. Even during the period when we don't see it, the chapel 'has a life of its own'; and we deduce its story by putting together the simplest connection compatible with what we do see.

Although such connections involve an effort of construal on our part, the effort is ordinarily automatic and subliminal. But in some less obvious cases, a more conscious kind of thinking may be required. In recent tutorials on *Wuthering Heights,* several of my students had a problem with Hindley's behaviour during the period of Heathcliff's dominance at the Heights. Why doesn't Hindley fight against the 'new master'? Why does he put up with Heathcliff's tyranny? Of course, Hindley's decline takes place largely out of our view; the scenes in which he appears during this period reveal atypical rather than typical behaviour. But when the problem was discussed in the tutorial, the effects of Hindley's peculiar personality were recognized; given his self-destructive impulses, his perverse desire to sink 'to the pits', and his liking for threatening words and gestures at the expense of real action, his behaviour no longer seemed so inexplicable. In

such cases, the possibilities of construal are guided and controlled by the evidence in the text, but the initial effort of construal may vary significantly from reader to reader.

In understanding the chapel's decay and Hindley's behaviour, the reader evidently draws upon default assumptions carried over from her/his experience in the real world—assumptions about physical causality and human psychology. But the principles of identity and consequentiality are not limited to realistic fiction. A science fiction novel may create a world in which self-restoring artefacts are the norm; in which case we shall think very differently about a building that seems to decay. Another science fiction novel may create a society where submissiveness is the ultimate virtue; in which case we shall think very differently about how a character responds to domination. In this latter case, peculiar personality features won't be needed to justify a failure to fight against domination, but they may be needed to justify threatening words and gestures.

The principles of identity and consequentiality can be used in the creation of an alternative world because they were never simply given to us by our own actual world in the first place. Certainly, they have been developed and refined in interreaction with reality; at the very least, they have been validated over other possibilities because they consistently seem to *work*. But we did not learn them from our experience of reality, we applied them to make sense of our experience of reality. The construal of a fictional world is a *second* application of the act by which we originally construed our own actual world as world; but it is not *secondary* in the sense of being merely derivative or dependent. Concentrating upon realistic fiction may mislead us here. For when a novel tries to imitate our own actual world as closely as possible, it might seem that our impression of objective existence is merely *borrowed* from that actual world—as though sheer analogy were capable of tricking us into an illusion of worldhood. But this view collapses in the face of novels like *Dune* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which create a supreme sense of *world-ish-ness* without in any way imitating our own actual world. Fantasy fiction clarifies what realistic fiction may tend to obscure: that realism in fiction and *world-ish-ness* in fiction are two quite separate issues.

IV

So much for the definite knowledges produced by synthesis. But there is also the sense of a fictional world extending beyond our definite knowledge. Different considerations are involved here.

Syntagmatically, meanings go beyond words to the extent that they are between words—or between sentences, or between clusters of sentences. The very metaphor of words as markers requires *between-ness*: a shape cannot be pinned down *around* a marker. It is *between-ness* which takes our creative activity out of the realm of mere subjective caprice and controls it along the lines of a *re-* creation.

(By way of a momentary detour at this point, let me mention the common impression that the limits of a novel are somehow established by the first and last scenes actually presented. Syntagmatic theory can account for this impression, as well as revealing its ultimate inadequacy. For it is true that we ordinarily expect to be able to work out what goes on *between* the first and last scenes presented—or that what we can't work out will appear to us as a mystery. (A permanently insoluble mystery, in the case of Postmodern novels by writers such as Pynchon.) But it is also fairly obviously true that the words of a character in conversation or mental soliloquy may give us definite knowledge about events occurring before the 'beginning' of the novel; and the words of an authorial commentator or narrator may give us definite knowledge about events occurring before the 'beginning' or after the 'ending' of a novel. Clearly, definite knowledge can be construed *between words* even when it is not construed *between scenes*. The possibilities of synthesis on the smaller scale are not circumscribed within the possibilities of synthesis on the larger scale. Once again, there is no neat overall boundary to impose 'in advance'; we must be on the look-out for syntagmatic meanings wherever they turn up in our reading.)

The sense of a world extending beyond our definite knowledge is the sense of a world lying *around,* not *between.* Many critics who have been happy to talk about fictional worlds have nonetheless drawn a very strong distinction between fictional worlds and our own actual world in this respect. Is it not a fact that our own actual world *really* does extend beyond what we know? Is it not a fact that we can look further and find out more about our actual world, whereas we can never explore a fictional world beyond the evidence of a fixed set of words in a book? This is indeed an important difference, but not so absolute a difference as is often supposed. Even in the terms of the argument just given, a problem arises over the possibility of sequels— and prequels too, in such genres as science fiction and fantasy writing. And what can it mean to talk about the world of Yoknapatawpha or the world of Balzac's Paris as though such worlds were somehow larger than any single book? If we want to say, a propos of *As I Lay*

Dying, that the life of Flem Snopes comes to an absolute halt where the evidence runs out in that particular book, how can we then recognize the Flem Snopes of *The Hamlet* as being the same character?

On the other side of the distinction, the extension of our own actual world is also problematic. It's all very well to say that our world *really* does extend beyond what we know—but how do we know this? Suppose you come to an unfamiliar town, you walk down certain particular streets, you cast your gaze in certain particular directions. How can you be sure that the limit of your perceptions is not the limit of what exists? that sudden blankness doesn't lie around the corner of that street you chose not to go down? that a space of total nothingness doesn't lie beyond that portion of a building where you happened to cast your gaze? Such questions would be unanswerable if our own actual world were simply handed across to us in one percept after another. But our own actual world is not simply handed across; we know it *as world* only because we spread out the ground on which it can appear. Objectivity, identity and consequentiality are principles which *we* contribute. And since such principles are not observed or received as percepts, they do not cease to exist the moment we run out of percepts. This is the Kantian answer to the problem unearthed by Empiricist epistemology. Beyond what we actually know, the extension of our world spreads like a ground on which nothing has yet appeared—an indefinite sense of a world.

If such is the case for our own actual world, then fictional worlds are not so very different after all. Admittedly, we cannot choose to expand our definite knowledge beyond the evidence of what has already been written—whereas we can choose to turn our heads in a new direction or walk down a previously unexplored street, and we can choose to find out more about the sinking of the *Titanic* by consulting other books and sources of evidence. With fiction, the relative disposition of definite knowledge and indefinite sense of a world is fixed. But the underlying similarity still holds good; fictional worlds also depend upon our creative activity. It is we who spread out the ground, who contribute the principles, who transform the mere meanings of single words into people, places and events. And what we bring to the meanings of single words doesn't just come to a halt as soon as the word-meanings cease. Our sense of a world extends more widely than our definite knowledge of particular people, places and events within it.

This sense of a world plays a significant part in our reading experience, and should not be banished beyond the pale of critical discussion. But it must of course be discussed in an entirely different way to definite knowledges; as I have said, one cannot choose to alter the relative disposition of definite knowledge and indefinite sense of a world. This is where nineteenth-century critics most often go astray, leaving themselves open to the accusations levelled by twentieth-century critics such as the author of 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' But twentieth-century critics, I believe, have over-theorized and over-generalized their accusations. There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Notes

1   It is true that, in Logical Analytical philosophy, the old commonsensical idea of how word-meanings combine is supplanted by a new conception of logical structure. But, as argued in *Beyond Superstructuralism*, London, 1993, the Logical Analytical conception of logical structure still does not recognize the enormity of what happens to meaning in the transition from individual words to sentences.

2   Ray Jackendoff, *Semantic Structures*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, pp.28–29.

3   Here is a deliberate echo of the terminology used in certain recent theories of communication, especially the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson. Following on from Grice's concept of implicatures, Sperber and Wilson demonstrate how all communication works by inferences based upon the evidences available in a particular communicational context. I accept their demonstration, and I agree (perhaps more strongly than at the time when I wrote *Beyond Superstructuralism*) that the additional evidence of linguistic utterance is in the last analysis always grafted on to a communicational context. But linguistic utterance has special powers, as Sperber and Wilson recognise; and those powers, I suggest, work by the special intra-linguistic inferences required to combine the evidence of single words. Such inferences are not simply the same as those required to combine the various evidences (which may include combinations of words) available in a particular communicational context; but the same principles are involved. There is, I believe, a natural congruence between Relevance Theory and syntagmatic theory. See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, 1986.

4   Of course, 'largely' is an important concession here: some syntactical rules apply above the sentence level, and the compulsion of syntactical rules is not the whole story of combination within the sentence. For further discussion, see *Beyond Superstructuralism*, pp.44, 124–28.