

Chronology and Statistics: Objective Understanding of Authorial Meaning

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to prove that chronology and statistics are the effective means for objective interpretation of authorial meaning. In defence of his hermeneutic theory against Eagleton's liberal-humanistic opposition, Hirsch asserts no other object can be the norm of literary criticism than authorial meaning. One of the most useful tools for the objective detection of authorial meaning is the Sanger-Kroeber method—Sanger's chronological study of the structure of fiction and Kroeber's statistical quantification of formal elements. Its application to the analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* reveals that the novel's central protagonist is the eponymous heroine, not her father as has been conventionally considered. Subjective readings will be superseded by new ones. But, readings based on objective data will not.

1. Introduction

Is the quest for authorial meaning an appropriate aim of literary analysis? The history of literary theories, in a sense, has been the history of critics' attempts to look for an answer to this long-standing issue. Considering literary texts as the faithful reflection of authors' meanings, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. proclaims the aim of literary analysis is to find them out. For Terry Eagleton, by contrast, the belief in authorial intentions is an objectivist illusion. The two literary theorists' views on this subject will be surveyed in the following Section 2, where my own standpoint will also be made explicit.

If the search for authors' meanings could be a target of critical reading, how can we know them, and, above all, in the most objective way? The novelist writes fiction because he/she "has an idea of what he[/she] wants to convey" (Hirsch 101), that is, its

theme in the broadest sense. It may be one, two, or three in number, but should hardly be hundreds (especially in the case of realist writers), as often presented by the current subjectivist critics (in truth, they offer criticism on textual “significance,” not interpretation of textual “meaning,” of which the difference will be explicated in Section 2). In Section 3, I introduce the structuralist approaches of C. P. Sanger and Karl Kroeber as sensible ways for achieving the objective interpretation of authorial intentions, and discuss their merits and demerits.

Section 4 applies their techniques to Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* to scrutinize their efficacy. Finally, in Section 5, I shall conclude that the Sanger-Kroeber method is one of the most illuminating means for objective interpretation of realist fiction.¹

2. The Norm of Criticism: Authorial Meaning

2.1. Hirsch and Eagleton

The essential divergence between Hirsch and Eagleton is in their views on the norm of literary criticism. The former considers it vital in analysis of literature and insists the only criterion that could be the norm is authorial meaning: “If [a critic’s] claim to validity is to hold, he must be willing to measure his interpretation against a genuinely discriminating norm, and the only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant” (Hirsch 26). The latter, on the other hand, expresses doubts about the American hermeneuticist’s theory by quoting some anti-intentionalist literary theories in his own defence. In this section, some basic conceptual grounds of each critic will be focused.

¹ Since the effectiveness of the Sanger-Kroeber method has been examined chiefly through the analysis of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, I set the object for my discussion on realist fiction. In contrast to modernist and postmodernist texts, which “subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction” (Abrams 167), realist texts, including Gaskell’s, presuppose that signified is the faithful representation of signifiers. Therefore, they fit the purpose of the SK method more. See also Section 3.3 of this paper.

First, Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance will be explained (2.2); then, that between interpretation and criticism (2.3)—the two central principles in hermeneutics. Next, the discrepancies between Eagleton and Hirsch will be examined under the headings of Husserlian Phenomenology (2.4), Language and Meaning (2.5), Historicism (2.6), Author and Text (2.7), Hermeneutic Circle (2.8), and Creative Reading (2.9). Finally, after the summary of the discussion, my standpoint will be made clear in 2.10.

2.2. Meaning and Significance

Hirsch distinguishes the meaning of a text from its significance: “*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable” (8). Meaning is “determined once and for all by the character of the speaker’s intention” (Husserl, qtd. in Hirsch 219), or permanent, while significance variable.

There is a difference between the meaning of a text (which does not change) and the meaning of a text to us today (which changes). The meaning of a text is that which the author meant by his use of particular linguistic symbols. Being linguistic, this meaning is communal, that is, self-identical and reproducible in more than one consciousness. Being reproducible, it is the same whenever and wherever it is understood by another. However, each time this meaning is construed, its meaning to the construer (its significance) is different. Since his situation is different, so is the character of his relationship to the construed meaning. It is precisely because the meaning of the text is always the same that its rela-

tionship to a different situation is a different relationship. (255)

His purport, as succinctly summarized by Eagleton, is that “a literary work may ‘mean’ different things to different people at different times. But this [. . .] is more properly a matter of the work’s ‘significance’ rather than its ‘meaning.’ [. . .] Significances vary throughout history, whereas meanings remain constant; authors put in meanings, whereas readers assign significances” (*Literary Theory* 58). Hirsch’s answer to the post-structuralist argument that the meaning of a text changes even for its author, therefore, would be that “the *significance* of the work to the author” may change, but that its *meaning* does not (8).

2.3. Interpretation and Criticism

Hirsch’s principle of direct correspondence between authorial and textual meaning and his differentiation of meaning from significance are contested by Eagleton: “To secure the meaning of a work for all time, rescuing it from the ravages of history, criticism has to police its potentially anarchic details, hemming them back with the compound of ‘typical’ meaning. Its stance towards the text is authoritarian and juridical: anything which cannot be herded inside the enclosure of ‘probable authorial meaning’ is brusquely expelled, and everything remaining within that enclosure is strictly subordinated to this single governing intention. The unalterable meaning of the sacred scripture has been preserved; what one does with it, how one uses it, becomes merely a secondary matter of ‘significance’” (*Literary Theory* 59). Eagleton’s disingenuous exposition of Hirschian theory is probably produced from his disregard of the central principle of hermeneutics—the distinction between interpretation and criticism:

Interpretation is the construction of textual meaning as such: it explicates [. . .] those meanings, and only those meanings, which the text explicitly or implicitly represents. Criticism, on the other hand, builds on the re-

sults of interpretation; it confronts textual meaning not as such but as a component within a larger context. [. . .] The object of interpretation is textual meaning in and for itself and may be called the *meaning* of the text. The object of criticism, on the other hand, is that meaning in its bearing on something else (standards of value, present concerns, etc.), and this object may therefore be called the *significance* of the text. (210-11)

Calling all critical writing on texts by the name of the neutral term “commentary,” Hirsch proposes to reserve the familiar term “criticism” for commentary about significance and “interpretation” for commentary about meaning (143). The cardinal function of “interpretation” is to understand the author’s meaning; that of “criticism” to judge the significance of that meaning, i.e. “its relation to ourselves, to history, to the author’s personality, even to the author’s other works” (143). In a nutshell, the goal of interpretation is the accurate understanding of authorial meaning, that of criticism the sensible judgement on the text’s significance; or, “understanding” is to interpret textual meaning, “judgement” to criticize textual significance (143-44).² After all, as a result of disregarding the differences of goals between criticism and interpretation, Eagleton complains that his aim of textual criticism cannot be achieved by Hirsch’s theory whose real aim is textual interpretation.

In response to Eagleton’s argument, Hirsch argues that “To say that verbal meaning is determinate is not to exclude complexities of meaning but only to insist that a text’s meaning is what it is and not a hundred other things” (230).³ “The interpreter’s job,” therefore, “is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of

² In my paper, these terms are used principally in the senses of the Hirschian definitions.

³ “Verbal meaning” is authorial and sharable meaning: it is “whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs” (Hirsch 31).

possibilities” (Hirsch 231). In the Hirschian thesis, “significance is the proper object of criticism, not of interpretation, whose exclusive object is verbal meaning” (Hirsch 57).

2.4. Husserlian Phenomenology

The purpose of Hirsch’s *Validity of Interpretation* is to awaken us to the need of a permanent standard for literary criticism:

[I argue] against certain modern theories which hamper the establishment of normative principles in interpretation and which thereby encourage the subjectivism and individualism which have for many students discredited the analytical movement. By normative principles I mean those notions which concern the nature of a correct interpretation. When the critic clearly conceives what a correct interpretation is in principle, he possesses a guiding idea against which he can measure his construction. Without such a guiding idea, self-critical or objective interpretation is hardly possible. Current theory, however, fails to provide such a principle. (212)

Deploring “wilful arbitrariness and extravagance in academic criticism” (2) brought about by the prevalence of the theory of authorial irrelevance, the American hermeneuticist asserts that “To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning” is “to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation” (5).

As he himself acknowledges (242), Hirsch somewhat owes his idea to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. According to Husserl, “all realities must be treated as pure ‘phenomena,’ in terms of their appearances in our mind, and this is the only absolute data from which we can begin” (*Literary Theory* 48). Hence, in the Husserlian phenomenological analysis, “The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the au-

thor's consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author's mind. To know this mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know of the author—biographical criticism is banned—but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself. Moreover, we are concerned with the 'deep structures' of this mind, which can be found in recurrent themes and patterns of imagery" (*Literary Theory* 51). To "penetrate to the very interior of a writer's consciousness, phenomenological criticism tries to achieve complete objectivity and disinterestedness. It must purge itself of its own predilections, plunge itself empathetically into the 'world' of the work, and reproduce as exactly and unbiasedly as possible what it finds there" (*Literary Theory* 51-52).

This Husserlian phenomenological methodology is derided by Eagleton as "a wholly uncritical, non-evaluative mode of analysis" and "an idealist, essentialist, anti-historical, formalist and organicist type of criticism, a kind of pure distillation of the blind spots, prejudices and limitations of modern literary theory as a whole": "Criticism is not seen as a construction, an active interpretation of the work which will inevitably engage the critic's own interests and biases; it is a mere passive reception of the text, a pure transcription of its mental essences" (*Literary Theory* 52).

For Husserlian criticism, "the language of a literary work is little more than an 'expression' of its inner meanings" (*Literary Theory* 52); meaning is "identical with whatever 'mental object' the author had in mind, or 'intended,' at the time of writing" (*Literary Theory* 58). Accordingly, for Hirsch, who is sympathetic to Husserlian phenomenology,⁴ the insistence of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, his successor Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Eagleton "that meaning is always historical" is only what

⁴ For Husserl, "the author alone is the determiner of a text's meaning" (Hirsch 248)

“opens the door to complete relativism” (*Literary Theory* 61). For Hirsch, meaning accords with language and remains unchangeable; for Eagleton, it cannot be the reflection of language which is social, historical, and unstable.

2.5. Language and Meaning

The two conflicting standpoints as to the correlation between language and meaning are plainly expressed in Eagleton’s recapitulation: “language is a much less stable affair than the classical structuralists had considered. Instead of being a well-defined, clearly demarcated structure containing symmetrical units of signifiers and signifieds, it now begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else. If this is so, then it strikes a serious blow at certain traditional theories of meaning. For such theories, it was the function of signs to reflect inward experiences or objects in the real world, to ‘make present’ one’s thoughts and feelings or to describe how reality was” (*Literary Theory* 112). The Post-Structuralist view in the first half of this quotation is repeatedly inserted in Eagleton’s book because it is his own view: “All language, as de Man rightly perceives, is ineradicably metaphorical, working by tropes and figures; it is a mistake to believe that any language is *literally* literal” (*Literary Theory* 126). He defends his assertion also by introducing William Empson’s view that “the meanings of a literary text are always in some measure promiscuous, never reducible to a final interpretation” (*Literary Theory* 46). Consequently, meanings are unsteady and indeterminate, since “they are the products of language, which always has something slippery about it”; “An author’s intention,” Eagleton continues, “is itself a complex ‘text,’ which can be debated, translated and variously interpreted just like any other” (*Literary Theory* 60).

In contrast, in Hirschian theory, language is a stable vehicle through which the author's meaning is conveyed; accordingly, if a text is unreadable, literature is unlikely to survive. Eagleton's distrust in language stability may be applicable to modernist fiction in which "what we are seeing might always have happened differently, or not happened at all" (*Literary Theory* 161). Empirical evidence shows texts may become figurative in some cases, but not always; for otherwise communication is impossible. To dispute a principle by quoting a few atypical instances and ignoring the textual genre is unwise as a tactic of debate, especially when the principle reasonably explains almost all internal phenomena as in realist fiction.

2.6. Historicism

Historicism is Eagleton's ideological stance: "all readers are socially and historically positioned, and how they interpret literary works will be deeply shaped by this fact" (*Literary Theory* 72). In support of Hans-Georg Gadamer's historicism, he states: "All understanding is *productive*: it is always 'understanding otherwise,' realizing new potential in the text, making a difference to it. The present is only ever understandable through the past, with which it forms a living continuity; and the past is always grasped from our own partial viewpoint within the present. The event of understanding comes about when our own 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions 'fuses' with the 'horizon' within which the work itself is placed. At such a moment we enter the alien world of the artefact, but at the same time gather it into our own realm, reaching a more complete understanding of ourselves"; "It is hard to see," Eagleton continues, "why Hirsch should find all this so unnerving. On the contrary, it all seems considerably too smooth" (*Literary Theory* 62).

On the other hand, for Hirsch, historicism is "the very target of his polemic" (*Literary Theory* 61). He feels it unnerving because it "cannot provide any satisfactory

norm of validity” (Hirsch 153). If there is no norm of interpretation, literary commentary only invites critical anarchy; the only criterion that could be the norm is authorial meaning; meaning is unchangeable as it is permanently fixed at the time of textual production—this is his fundamental standpoint. In addition, he distinguishes textual meaning from textual significance which is variable in accordance with cultural and historical backgrounds. Hirsch’s notion of the textual independence from social influences has a strong affinity with Kroeber’s: “No one doubts that the arts, especially fiction, reflect the course of social and cultural history. Yet all the arts (as historians of the fine arts have been quickest to recognize) possess a history of their own, a system of continuity and innovation which is to some degree independent of, often surprisingly resistive to, the influence of social transformations” (4).

2.7. Author and Text: Is the Text the Reflection of the Author’s Meaning?

Another common objection to Hirschian theory is that the text often fails to reflect authorial meaning: “The author’s desire to communicate a particular meaning is not necessarily the same as his success in doing so” (Hirsch 11). This argument corresponds to Pierre Macherey’s doubt about the author’s dependability as a witness to the meaning of his/her text: “We know that a writer never reflects mechanically or rigorously the ideology which he represents, even if his sole intention is to represent it: perhaps because no ideology is sufficiently consistent to survive the test of figuration” (195). Macherey’s view is shared by another anti-intentionalist, W. W. Robson: “A writer probably intended his work to have a certain emotional effect, but there is no way in which he can ensure that it actually has that effect. In this sense, then, liberty of interpreting is our prerogative as readers. It means freedom of judgment, of personal decision whether or not the writer has actually performed what he seemed to promise” (39). The distinction of authorial meaning from textual meaning is the position shared by Ea-

gleton as well: “There are obvious problems with trying to determine what is going on in somebody’s head and then claiming that this is the meaning of a piece of writing. For one thing, a great many things are likely to be going on in an author’s head at the time of writing” (*Literary Theory* 59). He then concludes that we “can never [. . .] come to know in some absolutely objective way” what an author has actually in mind, and that any “such notion of absolute objectivity is an illusion” (*Literary Theory* 60).

Hirsch makes little defence against the anti-intentionalists’ assertion, but rather accept it, because he knows the difficulty of attaining outright certainty in understanding authorial intention: “Since genuine certainty in interpretation is impossible, the aim of the discipline must be to reach a consensus, on the basis of what is known, that correct understanding has *probably* been achieved” (17). The detection of authorial meaning may be too tricky to be done with definite conviction, but can be, or rather should be, achieved with relative probability.

Against the psychoanalysts’ assertion that “what it [the text] does not say, and *how* it does not say it, may be as important as what it articulates; what seems absent, marginal or ambivalent about it may provide a central clue to its meanings” (*Literary Theory* 155), Hirsch argues, “by claiming to perceive implications of which the author was not conscious, we may sometimes distort and falsify the meaning of which he was conscious, which is not ‘better understanding’ but simply misunderstanding of the author’s meaning” (21). In connection with the Freudian concern with lies, he observes, “When I wish to deceive, my secret awareness that I am lying is irrelevant to the verbal meaning of my utterance. The only correct interpretation of my lie is, paradoxically, to view it as being a true statement, since this is the only correct construction of my verbal intention. Indeed, it is only when my listener has *understood* my meaning (presented as true) that he can *judge* it to be a lie” (243). Hirsch, in short, insists that whether uncon-

consciousness or deception affects the textual meaning depends entirely on the correct detection of authorial meaning. The unconscious would reveal itself only when the conscious is revealed. The psychoanalysts' "'symptomatic' places in the text—distortions, ambiguities, absence and elisions which may provide a specially valuable mode of access to the 'latent content,' or unconscious drives" (*Literary Theory* 158) would become meaningful if their import were proved in an objective way, not by personal insight. One of the most effective methods for this purpose, for instance, would be to analyse the frequency and context of their appearance by statistical quantification of such spots: if they appeared in accordance with a rule, they could be the reflection of some authorial stratagem; if not, they would only be the discovery of the critic's subjectivism. Thus, the outcome of a statistical survey should be a reliable criterion for adjudicating whether "symptomatic" spots represent any authorial intention.

To the Formalist, New Critical, Structuralist, and Post-Structuralist view of semantic autonomy that, because "textual meaning has nothing to do with the author's mind," "the object of interpretation is not the author but his text" (Hirsch 224), Hirsch expresses opposition in terms of its failure to supply a normative standard of validity in interpretation: "the task of finding out what a text says has no determinate object, since the text can say different things to different readers" (11). What a text says must be "the saying of the author or a reader," for it "does not exist even as a sequence of words until it is construed; until then, it is merely a sequence of signs" (Hirsch 13).

2.8. Hermeneutical Circle

Presuming "works of literature form an 'organic' unity," the Hirschian approach "seeks to fit each element of a text into a complete whole, in a process commonly known as the 'hermeneutical circle'" (*Literary Theory* 64): "the whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can be understood only through the whole"

(Hirsch 76). This hermeneutical unity is condemned by Eagleton: “Hermeneutics does not generally consider the possibility that literary works may be diffuse, incomplete and internally contradictory, though there are many reasons to assume that they are” (*Literary Theory* 64); “There is absolutely no need to suppose that works of literature either do or should constitute harmonious wholes” (*Literary Theory* 70). The disparity between Hirsch and Eagleton has arisen again from their different stances towards literary commentary: one is intentionalist, the other anti-intentionalist. The “interdependence of part and whole” (Hirsch 76) has something in common with Kroeber’s hypothesis that the form of any fictional element is affected by the entire scheme of the novel (8).

2.9. Creative Reading

Wolfgang Iser “permits the reader a fair degree of freedom, but we are not free simply to interpret as we wish. For an interpretation to be an interpretation of *this* text and not of some other, it must be in some sense logically constrained by the text itself. The work, in other words, exercises a degree of determinacy over readers’ responses to it, otherwise criticism would seem to fall into total anarchy” (*Literary Theory* 73). As a receptionist theorist, Stanley Fish is more aggressive than Iser: “The true writer is the reader: dissatisfied with mere Iserian co-partnership in the literary enterprise, the readers have now overthrown the bosses and installed themselves in power. For Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it *does* to you” (*Literary Theory* 74).

In Deconstruction also, the reader’s power is much stronger than the author’s. Roland Barthes, who doubts the straightforward correspondence between signifiers and signifieds, regards the “realist or representational sign” as “unhealthy,” since it “denies the *productive* character of language” (*Literary Theory* 118); for him, the text is “less a ‘structure’ than an open-ended process of ‘structuration’” (*Literary Theory* 120) to be

radically revised and reshuffled. Indeed there are some textual contradictions in Gaskell's fiction which will be welcomed by Deconstructionists as an opportunity for their criticism. For example, her time sequence is distorted between Chapters 5 and 6, Volume 2, of *North and South* where the event of August 1848 suddenly becomes that of October. Whether investigation into such aporias is fruitful or not depends upon the frequency of their occurrence. The higher the rate is, the more meaningful they become. If there is only one aporia in a novel of 500 pages long, it is probably safer to consider it only as an example of authorial carelessness than to develop a subjective investigation into the meaning of inconsistency. Deconstructionists will disagree, but statistics is an effective tool even for their approach.

The reader-response theorists' and Deconstructionists' notion that the text is open parallels with Eagleton's: "The claim that we can make a literary text mean whatever we like is in one sense quite justified. What after all is there to stop us? There is literally no end to the number of contexts we might invent for its words in order to make them signify differently" (*Literary Theory* 76). Hirsch's counter-argument to their position would be: textual meaning allows only one interpretation, but textual significance as many potential readings of the text as critics wish.

2.10. Suitability of Hirschian Theory

We have examined the theoretical difference between Eagleton and Hirsch under several headings. Eagleton doubts the language (signifier) is the faithful reflection of meaning (signified), because of his support for historicism in which meaning is unstable. "What had been narrow-minded about previous theories of meaning," he asserts, "was their dogmatic insistence that the intention of the speaker or writer was always paramount for interpretation. In countering this dogmatism, there was no need to pretend that intentions did not exist at all; it was simply necessary to point out the arbitrariness

of claiming that they were always the ruling structure of discourse” (*Literary Theory* 100-01). For Hirsch, on the other hand, language is trustworthy as the mirror of meaning; otherwise communication is unattainable, and no norm for interpretation can be established. Depending on the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey’s hermeneutic principles,⁵ Hirsch asserts: “to verify a text is simply to establish that the author probably meant what we construe his text to mean. The interpreter’s primary task is to reproduce in himself the author’s ‘logic,’ his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short, his world” (242). For Hirsch, “the thesis that an author’s verbal meaning is inaccessible” is “an empirical generalization which neither theory nor experience can decisively confirm or deny” (19).

“Most authors,” actually, “believe in the accessibility of their verbal meaning, for otherwise most of them would not write” (Hirsch 18). In spite of the long-standing dispute among critics as to whether language can be the obedient reflection of authorial meaning, “this universal faith” (Hirsch 18), after all, represents the fundamental premise for the interpretation of literature: no literary work exists without authorial meaning. To find it out, therefore, is one of the crucial aims of literary interpretation.

Because I am interested in presenting a valid and permanent interpretation of Gaskell’s fiction, not a short-lived criticism arising from personal insight, I cannot but consider Hirsch’s theory as more suitable to my purpose. It furnishes the soundest solution to the perennial problem that “if we do not choose to respect the author’s meaning then we have no ‘norm’ of interpretation, and risk opening the floodgates to critical anarchy” (*Literary Theory* 60). Besides, my standpoint is strengthened by the following two facts. First, despite his radical rejection of the Hirschian principle of close correspondence between language and meaning, Eagleton admits that in some cases language

⁵ For Dilthey, understanding is “the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject” (Hirsch 242).

reflects intentions (*Literary Theory* 98-99). Second, “critical anarchy” has been considered as undesirable even by some fervent supporters of “intentional fallacy,” or the idea of “what an author intended is irrelevant to the meaning of his text” (Hirsch 12).

For instance, Paul de Man observes that, despite Post-Structuralist scepticism about Hirsch’s principle, authorial meaning has “always played a prominent part” in the history of literary theories, “although it was mostly a negative one” (24); moreover, the Belgian Deconstructionist’s disapproval of New Criticism is based on its rejection of authorial intention as a fallacy: “The partial failure of American formalism [. . .] is due to its lack of awareness of the intentional structure of literary form” (27). Macherey and Robson, quoted above, have paid respect to the author’s intention in their concessions. French Post-Structuralist Jacques Derrida, Eagleton remarks, “is not seeking, *absurdly*, to deny the existence of relatively determinate truths, meanings, identities, intentions, historical continuities; he is seeking rather to see such things as the effects of a wider and deeper history—of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices” (*Literary Theory* 128; emphasis added). Although insisting “[t]he true writer is the reader” and that “the object of critical attention is the structure of the reader’s experience, not any ‘objective’ structure to be found in the work itself,” American Receptionist Stanley Fish is also “careful to guard against the hermeneutical anarchy to which his theory appears to lead. To avoid dissolving the text into a thousand competing readings, he appeals to certain ‘interpretative strategies’ which readers have in common, and which will govern their personal responses” (*Literary Theory* 74). Eagleton himself confesses transcendental meaning is a necessary criterion for the prevention of literary criticism from falling into chaos: “That any such transcendental meaning is a fiction—though *perhaps a necessary fiction*—is one consequence of the theory of language I have outlined” (*Literary Theory* 114; emphasis added).

The detractors of Hirschian theory recognize the necessity of authorial meaning, the direct correspondence between language and meaning, and the danger of critical anarchy; in other words, they express sympathy to his theory. Modern critical theories, in a sense, have developed in parallel with critics' shift from support for authorial meaning to its denial. Therefore, even for its most polemical denigrators, it should be difficult to make a flat denial of its existence. In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell quotes Brontë as appreciating a French reviewer of *Shirley* for his "just comprehension of the author's meaning" (324). This is a clear evidence to indicate Gaskell and Brontë believe authorial meaning does exist.

3. The Sanger-Kroeber Method

3.1. Sanger's Approach

If language mirrors meaning and seeking for authorial intention can be the aim of interpretation, one of the most efficient means to achieve it in an objective way should be to focus on the structure of a literary work. Like language, structure not only mirrors authorial theme, but also remains stable in the sense that key structural elements—such as "time," "location," and "characters"—remain "the *same* throughout the ages" (Hirsch 214).

The pioneering study of the fictional time sequence is Charles Percy Sanger's now-classic analysis of the structure of *Wuthering Heights*, where he demonstrated its careful time schemes and symmetrical family trees. His argument was reinforced by Charles Travis Clay's genealogical table (100-05)⁶ and J. F. Goodridge's ingenious graph of the novel's time structure (47-50). S. A. Power pointed out the errors in Sanger's chronology and Clay's, and even Emily Brontë's miscalculations (139-43). Notable

⁶ Power assumes Clay's chronology was composed independently because he made no reference to Sanger (139).

corrections were offered to Sanger's timings by A. Stuart Daley when he solved inconsistencies by disclosing the concurrence of the three harvest moons in the novel with the almanacs of 1826 and 1827 ("Moon and Almanacs" 337-53). The discoveries made by Sanger and Daley were synthesized by Inga-Stina Ewbank in her own edition of chronology (487-96). Having argued against Sanger, and Power as to the date of Heathcliff's death ("Heathcliff's Death" 15-19), Daley incorporated his conclusion into a revised chronology ("Revised Chronology" 169-73). The object of their structural analysis, after all, was "to give a detailed proof of the consummate care" the author "devoted to the construction of" her work (Clay 104).

For nearly eighty years since chronology was spotlighted as one of the most effective methods for understanding authorial meaning, a considerable numbers of literary analyses have been written from this angle.⁷ In his exploration of the "implied and ambiguous world which lies on the other side of the words on the page" (*IHAM?* ix), John Sutherland unconsciously expresses his concern with Sanger's perspective in solving the puzzles about *Mansfield Park* (*IHAM?* 5-7), *Pride and Prejudice* (*CJABH?* xi-xii), *Shirley* (*CJABH?* 91-92), and *Barchester Towers* (*CJABH?* 109-16). Not merely does he refer to three letters from his readers who investigated the chronologies of Jane Austen's and Anthony Trollope's fiction (*CJABH?* xi-xii), but also infers Rose Yorke's afterlife beyond the text of *Shirley* by comparing the fictional time with the chronological data of Mary Talyor, her model. Notwithstanding, chronology has attracted little attention from Gaskell scholars.⁸ Although having clarified the diversity of critical approaches, the succinct surveys of criticism by Patsy Stoneman (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 1-20) and Kate Flint

⁷ For instance, W. A. Bie 9-13; E. L. Davidson 48-56; J. F. Kobler 517-21; J. Meckier 157-94; G. M. Moore 195-204; B. Richardson 283-94; J. E. Tanner 369-80; D. Taylor 65-58; S. Towheed 217-18; F. L. Walze 408-15.

⁸ Exceptions are, to the best of my knowledge, four: (a) N. Henry, introduction to *Ruth* xxiii-xxxvii; (b) G. Handley, "The Chronology of *Sylvia's Lovers*" 302-03; (c) Andrew Sanders, "The Revised Chronology for *Sylvia's Lovers*" qtd. in *Sylvia's Lovers* (Oxford UP) 508-09; and (d) P.

(*Elizabeth Gaskell* 60-68) record no research of this type.

There is no lack of evidence to show that time plays a crucial role in Gaskell's works: distinctly or indistinctly, her narrator never fails to date her events. "Although not obtrusive—complete dates do not occur," Daley observes in his formal review of *Wuthering Heights*, "the dates and time are deducible, sometimes even to the hour of a specified day, sometimes within the span of a few days or weeks" ("Moons and Almanacs" 343). The same is true of Gaskell's fiction.

3.2. Kroeber's Approach

Whereas Sanger and his followers spotlighted only chronology as a means for clarifying authorial intention, Karl Kroeber highlights "location or setting," "action (narrative and dialogue)," and "characters," in addition to "time or temporal ordering." In order to analyse "the underlying structures of novels," he distinguishes the "four basic elements sure to be present in any work of fiction," displays "something of each element's function on each page of every novel studied" (141), and tabulates the results of his analysis. His hope is to "define more-or-less objectively some generic characteristics of one author's larger structural patterns relative to another's" by "identifying, even if only by pages, different novelists' treatment of time, setting, action, and characters" (141).

"Of the four elements studied," observes Kroeber, "the most objective is indubitably that of 'character'" (145). He makes a list of characters who appear "on at least five percent of total pages of their novel"—i.e. Jane Austen's six novels, Charlotte Brontë's four, and George Eliot's seven—, and "the percent of total pages of novel on which the character appears" (231). One of the intriguing outcomes of his investigation is that the protagonist who appears most in the novel corresponds to the eponymous hero or heroine, or the character who is generally estimated as hero or heroine, at the rate

M. Yarrow, "The Chronology of *Cranford*" 27-29.

of 82 percent. Exceptions are three: in *Shirley*, Shirley Keeldar appears 40 percent of the total pages, while Caroline Helstone 53; in *Felix Holt*, Felix 26 percent, whereas Esther Lyon 35; in *Romola*, Romola 52, Tito Melema 68 (231-34). In the other fourteen novels, the chief or eponymous protagonist shows the highest percentage of appearances. Apart from the inaccuracy Kroeber's calculation may inevitably entail—data were collected by the unit of the page (141) and the instructions given to his students leave room for subjective judgement (216)—, this result suggests the possibility of establishing the hypothesis that the chief protagonist is the character who appears most often. Indeed, in the case of Austen, this criterion applies to all her novels without exception (234). Could the chief protagonist be pinpointed by this rule, the whereabouts of authorial meaning should also be, because the protagonist is normally the character into whom authorial intention is condensed, or because, in Kroeber's phrase, "the form of any segment of a novel is to significant degree determined by the total design of the novel as a whole" (8). Another intriguing outcome of his formal scrutiny is that it confirms readers' familiar impression about the difference of appearance ratios among the chief protagonist, secondary characters, and minor characters. Stressing the importance of this seemingly commonplace result, Kroeber states: "The worth of such analyses lies in their depiction of familiar arrangements freed from the details of the stories of the novels. Formal analyses should articulate formal patterns" (148). Kroeber's analyses of characters "support the traditional attitude of regarding characters as the essential element in novels," and "suggest that 'characters' are as vital a feature of form as of subject matter" (145).

Pointing out some problems in the current critical arena, he enunciates the aim of his methodology: "The principal objections to modern literary criticism [. . .] are that it is separatist, egocentric, and committed to perfection. The work of even the best crit-

ics is of very little use to subsequent critics. Too often our criticism is either a gathering of personal insights unorganised by a methodology which would enable someone else interested in the same topic to build upon those insights, or a thinly veiled philosophical, religious, or political polemic. Very little of our criticism is honestly exploratory” (181-82). His complaint about modern criticism as “a gathering of personal insights” and his trust in exploratory criticism correspond to Hirsch’s lamentation over modern theories’ favouring of subjectivism and individualism (212) and his regarding of “literary study as a corporate enterprise and a progressive discipline” (209). One subjective reading will be replaced by another sooner or later, but an objective interpretation should survive.

3.3. Merits and Demerits

One of the defects of this type of objective measure is, as Kroeber himself acknowledges, that it tends “to miss or to obscure nuances of representation which over the course of a long novel are probably decisive for establishing its predominant aesthetic” (141-42); even if “the total time span of fictional action” is clarified, it is “only rarely [. . .] of much aesthetic significance” (142). Kroeber’s concession, however, is made on a false premise. Chronology and statistics are fundamentally intended to detect the authorial focus in an objective way. It is still the investigator’s task to scrutinize “nuances of representation” and “dominant aesthetic” before reaching the final conclusion. The same is true with the total time span of fictional action. Its detection is aimed at drawing an unbiased inference about authorial meaning; the hypothesis has to be reinforced by other internal and external components. In addition, it depends entirely on the fiction whether the discovery is of aesthetic importance: the symmetrical pedigrees of two families in *Wuthering Height* and the intermixture of the double plots in *Mary Barton* are the keys to understanding the aesthetic achievement of both novels. Fur-

thermore, the disadvantage of Kroeber's methodology is probably caused by his stylistic concern: he examined page by page whether the amount of time covered by an action was minutes, hours, days, months, or years, since his aim was to clarify which authors preferred a longer time span (217-18). If the duration of action were estimated for the purpose of pinpointing the centre of authorial concern, a novel's "predominant aesthetic" should be brought to light.

About structuralist techniques, Eagleton expresses an apprehension similar to Kroeber's: "The structuralist confidence in rigorous analysis and universal laws was appropriate to a technological age, lifting that scientific logic into the protected enclave of the human spirit itself [. . .]. But in doing so it offered, contradictorily, to undermine one of the ruling belief systems of that society, which could be roughly characterized as liberal humanist, and so was radical and technocratic together" (*Literary Theory* 192). The liberal humanists, who believe that "in reading we should be flexible and open-minded, prepared to put our beliefs into question and allow them to be transformed" (*Literary Theory* 69), dislike methodologies; prefer to read by intuitions and intelligent sensibility; and aim at nurturing spiritual wholeness in the world (*Literary Theory* 173-74). Their "distaste for the technocratic" (*Literary Theory* 174) is in constant disagreement with Sanger and Kroeber's concern with formalism; the former prefers arbitrary subjectivism, the latter rational objectivism.

The problem of this approach lies rather with the difficulty in detecting authorial meaning, for normally the structure of fiction is highly elaborate. For example, the investigator often encounters seeming chronological discrepancies. In fact, the periods of Mary's convalescence and her father's disappearance conflict with the linear progression of *Mary Barton's* chronology. These may be created by Gaskell's formal stratagems—such as "plurality of times" (different time schemes may be set for her narrator

and characters) or “interrelation of chronological paradox with characters” (confused time may be a reflection of characters’ perplexity). Or, it may be an error unamended, for “the author did not believe it was wrong” (Sutherland, *IHAM?* 18). In *North and South*, indeed, chronological inconsistency is found even in the text which originally appeared as a serial and was later revised by the author herself.⁹

The most valuable means for clearing up this difficulty is to pay attention to the text’s genre, other evidence, and structural emphasis. In a realist narrative, where “words are felt to link up with their thoughts or objects in essentially right and uncontrovertible ways” (*Literary Theory* 118), the possibility of plural times or chronological paradox being used is less likely than in modernist fiction; hence, chronological incongruity may be simply the result of authorial carelessness. In a modernist narrative, on the other hand, where the text “has no determinate meaning, no settled signifieds, but is plural and diffuse, an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes” (*Literary Theory* 119), seeming errors in the time scheme may probably be the spots where authorial devices are concealed. “To be concerned with the precise genre of a text,” Hirsch claims, “is to give every text its due and to avoid the external imposition of merely mechanical methods and cannons of interpretation” (263); “the genre concept is so important in textual study. By classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits a general horizon for its meaning. The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning components” (222).

Other information, intrinsic or extrinsic, is also precious in determining authorial meaning. Two ideas have been conflicting about Gaskell’s intention for “Lois the Witch,” the short fiction about the innocent 18-year-old English girl Lois Barclay being

⁹ Whether this is Gaskell’s intentional device or unintentional, this distortion could hardly be found without analysis of the novel’s internal chronology.

executed as a witch in 17th century Salem. Some view it as a study of “the devastating consequences of prejudice and mass hysteria on the lives of innocent people” (Ganz 217); others in terms of Lois’s Christian perseverance in the face of her surrounding threats. The Sanger-Kroeber analysis endorses the second reading. The investigation into Gaskell’s source, Charles Upham’s *Lectures on Witchcraft*—extrinsic information—, also champions it. Consequently, it should be most appropriate to conclude that the second interpretation represents authorial meaning.¹⁰ Hirsch is never weary of emphasizing that the outcome of statistical analysis must be examined by other data for its verification: “there always exists relevant evidence beyond such internal evidence, and failure to use it simply makes our guesses unreliable and all attempts at adjudication well-nigh impossible” (193); “it is unsound to insist on deriving all inferences from the text itself. [. . .] The extrinsic data is not, however, read into the text. On the contrary, it is used to verify that which we read out of it. The extrinsic information has ultimately a purely verificative function” (241).

The third clue for identifying authorial meaning is to discover structural elements on which the author placed special emphasis. In disparaging inclusivist tolerance of variety in interpretations, Hirsch observes: “The fundamental flaw in the ‘theory of the most inclusive interpretation’ is that it overlooks the problem of emphasis. Since different patterns of emphasis exclude one another, inclusivism is neither a genuine norm nor an adequate guiding principle for establishing an interpretation” (230). Because authorial meaning is “a *structure* of component meanings,” he asserts, “interpretation has not done its job when it simply enumerates what the component meanings are. The interpreter must also determine their probable structure and particularly their structure of emphases” (230).

¹⁰ Detailed discussion is conducted in my unpublished article “‘Lois the Witch’: The Story of Christian Fortitude.”

We thus guess the most “probable” authorial meaning. Absolute certainty may be unattainable—“a limitation which interpretation shares with many other disciplines” (Hirsch 164)—, but we still aim at reaching “an objective conclusion about relative probabilities” (Hirsch 172). “The interpreter’s goal,” Hirsch stresses, “is simply this—to show that a given reading is more probable than others. In hermeneutics, verification is a process of establishing relative probabilities” (236).

Despite his frank criticism of literary theories other than Marxism and Feminism, Eagleton is tolerant of the diversity of critical methodologies: “These forms of criticism differ from others because they define the object of analysis differently, have different values, beliefs and goals, and thus offer different kinds of strategy for the realizing of these goals. [. . .] There are many goals to be achieved, and many ways to achieving them” (*Literary Theory* 184-85); “Perhaps we should celebrate the plurality of critical methods, adopt a tolerantly ecumenical posture and rejoice in our freedom from the tyranny of any single procedure” (*Literary Theory* 172). In admitting methodological multifariousness, Hirsch shares Eagleton’s view: “There are no correct ‘methods’ of interpretation” (139).

Old or new, contentual or formal,¹¹ literary or scientific, the methodology should be chosen that is most suitable for the critic’s purpose, for, as Hirsch states: “No one has ever brought forward a concrete and practical canon of interpretation which applies to all texts, and it is my firm belief that practical canons are not consistently applicable even to the small range of texts for which they were formulated” (200), probably, there is no literary methodology which is universally applicable.

3.4. Summary

“Literary criticism,” remarks Eagleton, “does not usually dictate any particular

¹¹ The contentual method focuses on what is said in the text, while the formal analysis how it is said.

reading as long as it is ‘literary critical’” (77). If the Sanger-Kroeber method appears to lack “critical analysis,” it is probably because it centres on the elucidation of the structure of fiction, not on its evaluation, as is Structuralism's “analytical, not evaluative” method (*Literary Theory* 83). “When we analyse literature we are speaking of literature,” but “when we evaluate it we are speaking of ourselves” (*Literary Theory* 80). Eagleton would criticize statistical quantification as preserving “the *formalist* bent of New Criticism, its dogged attention to literature as aesthetic object rather than social practice” (79), and question the significance of “the search for a purely objective reading of literary works” (106). For, it “seems impossible to eradicate some element of interpretation, and so of subjectivity, from even the most rigorously objective analysis” (106). As we have seen above, however, chronology and statistical quantification produces almost the same and reproducible result at any time as long as done on the equal calculation principle. Another objection to the SK method is that the emotion produced in the readers’ mind by literary works cannot be measured by statistical data. On the contrary, twists in the plot such as a climactic moment and a flashback which generate tension in readers, are reflected faithfully on the data. Besides, emotional upheavals are a factor of subjective value-judgement, and differ depending on individuals.

Time-consuming, messy, and frustrating (Kroeber 4) as it may, the SK method unearths some pivotal forms of a novel. Their techniques help the reader infer its focal points, and provide hints for detecting authorial meaning more expressly than ever. Statistical quantification of the textual elements offers no superficial apprehension of the text’s form and content, but rather a comprehensive and objective understanding of its key structures. It overlooks no fundamental conflicts of the text, but rather spots them. In truth, statistics is employed by Hirsch himself as a means for examining the legitimacy of the interpreter’s probability judgement (184-85). The validity of reading, how-

ever, must be tested by every possible evidence, external or internal. To this point Hirsch calls our special attention: “The interpreter needs all the clues he can muster with regard not only to the text’s *language* and genre, but also to the cultural and personal attitudes the author might be expected to bring to bear in specifying his verbal meanings” (240).

4. Objective Interpretation of *Mary Barton*

4.1. Structural Analysis

Applying the Sanger-Kroeber method, i.e. chronology and quantification of formal segments, we shall examine the structure of *Mary Barton* below to discover its author’s meaning. First of all, let me quote two contrasting remarks on the novel’s main subject:

Essentially, the narrative is a drama of working-class radicalisation and its consequences, both personal and social. (Daly xxiii)

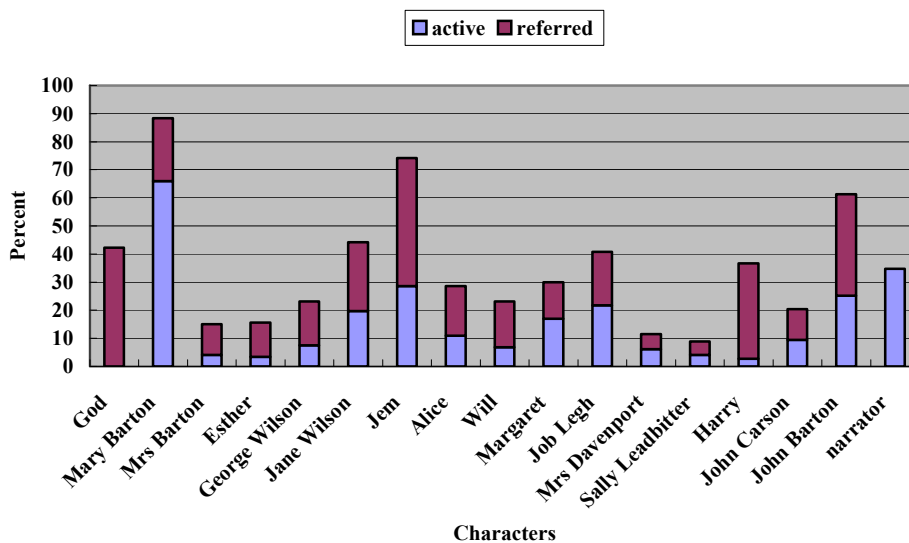
[T]he novel concerns itself from the very first with the public role of women, especially but not exclusively Mary’s role. (Nord 154)

Regarding *Mary Barton* as a social problem novel, Daly claims it is “the story of John Barton” (xxiii). Nord insists the focus is on Mary, his daughter, and the change of her role from private to public. Each discussion is coherent in its own way, but its conclusion is the outcome reached through the analysis conducted in terms of the critic’s subjective concerns, not through the quest for authorial meaning. Both pay little attention to structure.

Following the Sanger-Kroeber method, therefore, I analysed the time sequence and the characters’ frequency of appearance in *Mary Barton*. Before reporting the results, let me explain about the Comprehensive Chronology, the source of statistical data.

To obtain objective information about the three key structural elements—time, place, and characters—I first divided the story into scenes by time indicators in the text; then, examined scene by scene if a certain character is active or not, or only referred to by other characters including the narrator, simultaneously specifying the scene length in page number of the half-page unit so that we could know its percentage in the entire text. The setting of action or description was also examined for the analysis of stage shifts. This Chronology should offer more accurate data than Sanger’s about the author’s intentional or unintentional plan for carrying his/her story. According to the Chronology, *Mary Barton* covers roughly nine years from May 1834 to 1842/43 by 147 scenes.¹²

Figure 1: Characters’ Frequency of Appearance in *Mary Barton*



The scrutiny offers an intriguing result concerning characters’ frequency of appearance. Figure 1, the bar chart of the percentages of characters’ active scenes and referred, demonstrates the character who appears most frequently is Mary (active=66%, referred=22.4%, total=88.4%), followed by Jem, her lover and future husband (ac-

¹² The limited space makes me refrain from inserting the whole Chronology here. See my article “Is

tive=28.6%; referred=45.6%; total=74.1%). John Barton comes third (active=25.2%; referred=36.1%; total=61.2%). This outcome suggests the focal point is Mary and the fulfilment of her love, rather than her father and his industrial conflict.

Some may feel doubt about this proposition, considering it is not always true that the chief protagonist shows the highest percentage of appearances. However, as explained in Section 3.2 of this paper, this principle is applicable at the rate of 82 percent, according to Kroeber. In the analysis of *Mary Barton*, most reliable should be the data on Gaskell's fiction, because "valid interpretation is always governed by a valid inference about genre" (Hirsch 113). The Comprehensive Chronologies of her four other novels confirm that the principle is germane to Gaskell's novels at the rate of 100 percent. In *Ruth*, Ruth Hilton's appearance occupies the highest rate (active=66.4%, referred=19.1%, total=85.5%), followed by Thurstan Benson's (active=41.9%, referred=12.4%, total=54.4%) and Leonard's (active=22%, referred=22.4%, total=44.4%).¹³ In *North and South*, Margaret Hale ranks first (active=80.2%, referred=16.2%, total=96.4%), her father Richard (active=43.7%, referred=26.3%, total=70.1%), her mother Maria third (active=22.8%, referred=33.5%, total=56.3%), and the industrial master Thornton fourth (active=26.7%, referred=29.3%, total=55.1%).¹⁴

Mary Barton an Industrial Novel?" *The Gaskell Society Journal* 15 (2001): 14-20, for details.

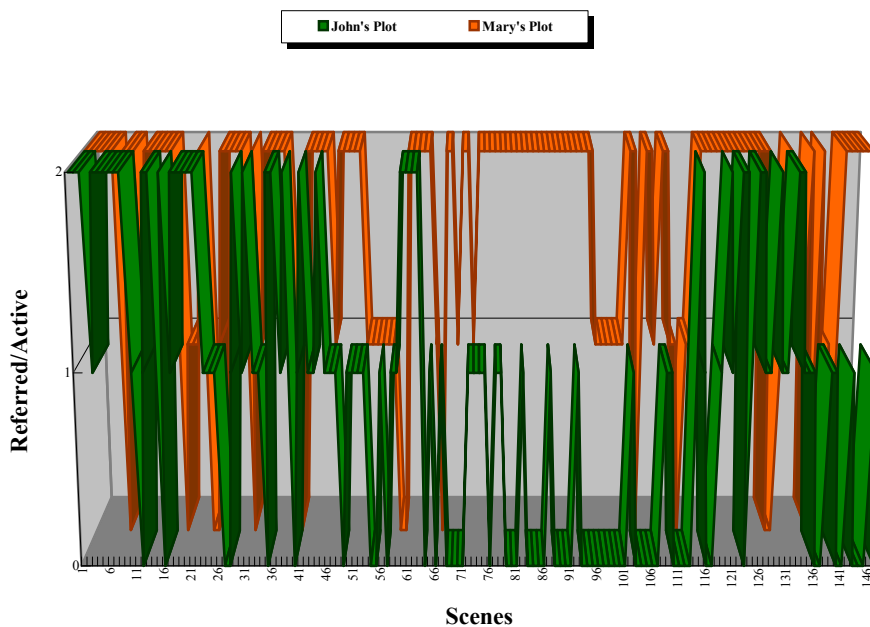
¹³ Subjective reading often produces contradictory interpretations. For example, J. D. Sanders is critical of Gaskell's plotting of *Ruth*: "She shifts her scenes often, and brings in many matters outside Ruth's story; these, though they are made at times to bear upon the main plot, serve to impair the unity of the whole" (50). On the other hand, Easson is approving: "the plot is tightly knit up, so that Ruth's story is always at the centre and the other plot developments [. . .] play their part by forwarding it" (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 109). Investigation into the chief characters' frequency of appearance reveals Gaskell's central design for plotting lies in the heroine's association with three families; that is, the form of *Ruth* champions Easson's reading. The full analysis is carried out in my forthcoming article "The Structure of *Ruth*: Is the Heroine's Martyrdom Inconsistent with the Plot?" *The Gaskell Society Journal* 18 (2004).

¹⁴ Judging from this outcome, we cannot help assuming that it is wrong to view *North and South* as a social problem novel, as is often done, which deals with the process of the capitalist's understanding of his labourers' plight. Inquiry into the heroine's topographical movement discloses the close interrelation between the industrial and love plots, and the author's intention of incorporating two themes into one book. Detailed discussion has been conducted in my unpublished article "The Structure of *North and South*: The Novel of Two Themes."

In *Sylvia's Lovers* comes Sylvia Robson first; in *Wives and Daughters* Molly Gibson. Consequently, it is highly probable that in Gaskell's fiction the most frequent appearer is equivalent to the chief protagonist, or the centre of authorial meaning.

To examine the validity of the hypothesis that the novel's focus is not on John Barton but his daughter, I prepared the three-dimensional graph of their plots' flows (Figure 2). The total 147 scenes were inspected to check their appearances, and, for the convenience's sake, two points were given to a protagonist if he/she was active in a scene, one point if referred to, and no point if absent. Figure 2 illustrates that John Barton disappears from Scene 61/62 to Scene 114, where he is away from Manchester to do some mission in Glasgow. Figure 2 also demonstrates that Mary is drawn as acting from beginning to end. Some critics argue that she is not spotlighted until the latter half of the

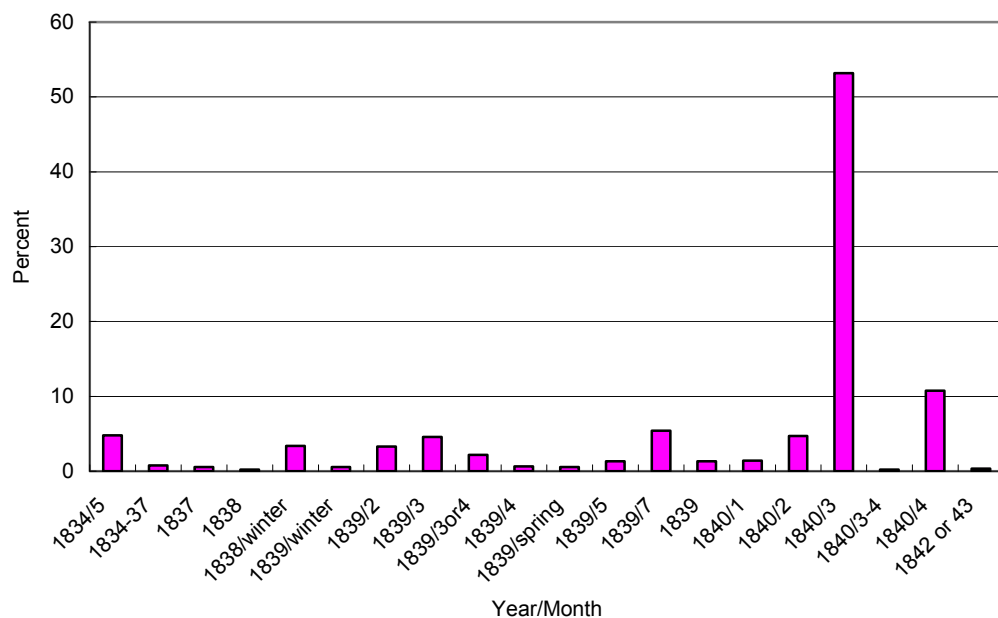
Figure 2: Plot Flow in *Mary Barton*



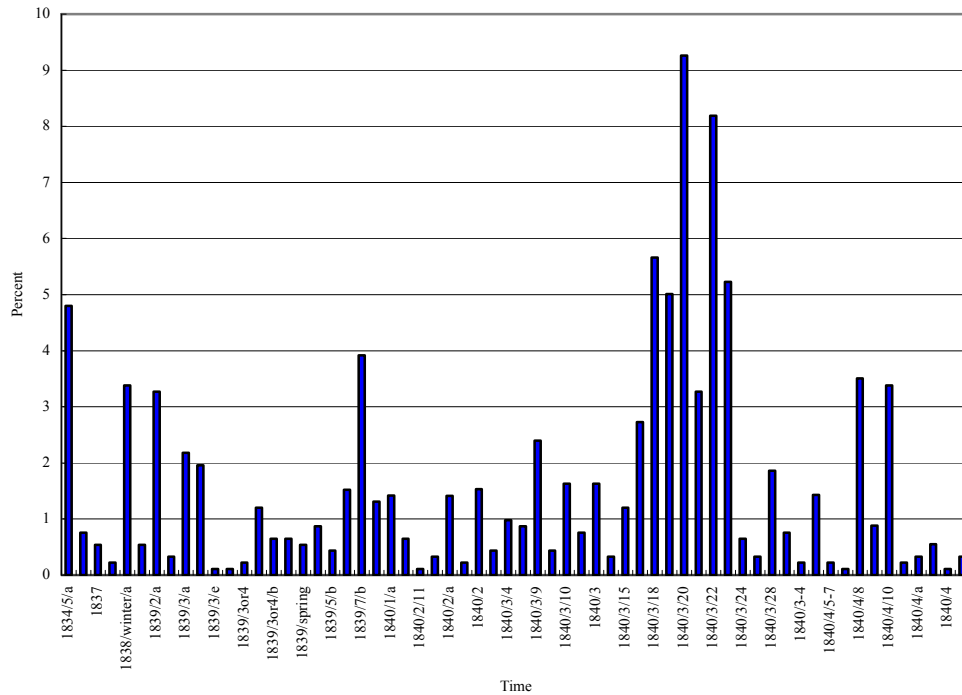
story,¹⁵ although their view contradicts the structural evidence. Anyway, the result of the second formal analysis implies as well that Mary is the central protagonist.

Let us corroborate this hypothesis from another perspective: the time sequence. Figure 3, where the scene percentages are arranged by the monthly unit, displays the narrative of March 1840 occupies 53.2% of the total page. What is narrated in this month? The question should be resolved could the narrative be explicated on a daily basis. Thus, Figure 4 was created by collecting the scene percentages by the daily unit. According to the bar graph of the daily sequence, the day to which the largest number of pages is allocated is 20 March (9.3%), when Mary, having realized from her aunt Esther's information that the true assassin of Harry Carson is her father, starts to act for rescuing her lover Jem Wilson, who has been arrested as the murder suspect. The sec-

Figure 3: Monthly Sequence in *Mary Barton*



¹⁵ For example, Daly (xx), Hopkins (76), and Lansbury (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 17).

Figure 4: Daily Sequence in *Mary Barton*

ond largest space is given to 22 March (8.2%) when Mary's adventure of reaching Will Wilson in Liverpool is centred on. The third to 18 March (5.7%), the day recording Will Wilson's farewell to Mary, John Barton's departure from Manchester, Alice Rose's fatal stroke of paralysis, and the Carsons' agony for the death of Harry. 23 March, the day of Jem's trial, comes fourth (5.2%), followed by 19 March (5.0%), when Mary knows Jem has been arrested as the suspected murder of Harry. In short, the central topic of six days from 18 March is Mary's efforts to save Jem. Accordingly, the third structural investigation also hints that the central protagonist is Mary Barton.

4.2. Author's Confession

Investigation into the novel's key structures seemingly champions the hypothesis that the focus of the story lies on Mary. Provided it is legitimate, how should Gaskell's often-quoted confession be interpreted that the central character is John Barton?

'John Barton' was the original title. [. . .] Round the character of John

Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, *the* person with whom all my sympathies went, with whom I tried to identify myself at the time [of writing]. (*Letters* 74)

Frankly speaking, this authorial observation is misleading. Since it was made as a self-defence against the attack of W. R. Greg, who insisted mill-owners were not so merciless as described in *Mary Barton*,¹⁶ it is very likely that the social problem alone was consequently selected as the target of her vindication. In addition, “the author’s subjective stance,” as Hirsch emphasises, “is not part of his verbal meaning even when he explicitly discusses his feelings and attitudes” (241). Extrinsic knowledge should be employed only to authenticate what we read out of the text; for, if we read it into the text, it hampers us from detecting authorial meaning, which “must be represented by and limited by the text alone” (Hirsch 241-42). The reliability of the author’s remarks on his/her own work should be determined by the intrinsic objective evidence.

Easson asserts: “Despite Gaskell’s claim after publication that ‘John Barton’ was the original title, the original names [“A Manchester Love Story” and “A Tale of Manchester Life”] suggest that Mary’s love was, along with Manchester life, always central to her design” (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 73). Statistical quantification of the key structures of fiction has revealed the social problem treated in *Mary Barton* is only one aspect of the novel, and that much more description is given to the development of the heroine’s love. The formal evidence, accordingly, favours Easson’s interpretation—the novel’s focal point is Mary, not John. Consequently, the title “Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life” is the faithful reflection of the novel’s content and structure.

Despite this outcome, anti-intentionalists may still regard John Barton as the central protagonist, insisting the events of 18-23 March 1840 (53.2%) have been drawn

¹⁶ The biographical background surrounding this quotation is discussed on pages 14 and 19 of “Is *Mary Barton* an Industrial Novel?”

as a prerequisite for heightening tension towards the climactic scenes of the operative's confession of his guilt on 8 April (3.5%), of his death in his enemy John Carson's arms on 9 April (0.9%), and of the mill-owner's subsequent learning of Christian charity on 10 April (3.4%). Indeed, the impact of John Barton's tragedy is so great that its quality can hardly be quantified by statistics. If this reading represents authorial meaning better than ours, then our interpretation should be wrong. Truly, we cannot be too discreet to rely on statistical data in the quest for authorial meaning. However, it is also true statistics offers objective (therefore, reliable) evidence about key structures to judge authorial meaning. It is entirely readers' discretion to acclaim *Mary Barton* is a Condition-of-England novel, ignoring the statistical evidence to the opposite effect. Their object of literary analysis is textual significance, while ours is textual meaning.

5. Conclusion

We "always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns"; without them, we are incapable of making criticism (*Literary Theory* 10). Psychoanalysts spotlight ambiguities in dialogues to detect the protagonist's unconsciousness. Marxists centre on the class struggle to explain it from the historical or political perspective. Feminists focus on the heroine's sufferings or strength to study gender and sexuality. Critics are free to undertake their own interpretations, disregarding authorial meanings, since, as Barthes states, the author is dead. This trend in literary criticism, however, is the very cause that has invited "critical anarchy." A typical example of this situation is the difference of interpretation as to the theme of *Mary Barton* between Marxists and Feminists: the former regard it as the "social-problem" novel, the latter the heroine's Bildungsroman. This chaos may be agreeable for a receptionist critic like Wolfgang Iser, for "different readers are free to actualise the work in different ways, and

there is no single correct interpretation which will exhaust its semantic potential” as long as the reader rewrites the text “to render it internally *consistent*” (*Literary Theory* 70). It is a deplorable situation, nevertheless, for the hermeneuticist Hirsch and the structuralists Sanger and Kroeber. Hirsch advocates authorial meaning as the only norm of literary criticism. For its objective understanding, Sanger and Kroeber resort to chronology and statistics in examining “time, location, and characters,” three pivotal structural elements in all literary works. Chronologies of novels bring to light which hour, day, or year is most emphasised and described in fullest details. Statistical investigation into topographical movement demonstrates the central and marginal locations of fiction. Statistical quantification of the frequency of characters’ appearance reveals who are central protagonists or sub-characters. In short, the Sanger-Kroeber method clarifies in the most objective way the spots where authors, consciously or unconsciously, have condensed their intentions.

Scientific analysis of fiction may be embarrassing since literature is traditionally believed to be “identical with the opposite of analytical thought and conceptual enquiry,” in other words, with “feeling and experience” (*Literary Theory* 22). Although approaches are different, however, the linguistic analysis by Russian Formalists, Structuralists, and New Critics were also “scientific.”¹⁷ It was his “scientific” impulse which led Northrop Frye to “a formalism even more full-blooded than that of New Criticism” (*Literary Theory* 80). Psychoanalysts may criticize statistical quantification for its overlooking of textual evasion and omission. On the contrary, it helps us find the spot where their method is most useful, and also whether it is worth attempting or not. Eagleton concludes his survey of literary theories by observing “What you choose and reject theoretically [. . .] depends upon what you are practically trying to do. This has always

¹⁷ Liberal humanists’ embarrassment at structuralist confidence in scientific and technological approach is explained by Eagleton (*Literary Theory* 191-92).

been the case with literary criticism. [. . .] In any academic study we select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life” (184). Hirsch expresses his idea of the purpose of literary criticism in his Preface: “The theoretical aim of a genuine discipline, scientific or humanistic, is the attainment of truth, and its practical aim is agreement that truth has probably been achieved. Thus the practical goal of every genuine discipline is consensus—the winning of firmly grounded agreement that one set of conclusions is more probable than others—and this is precisely the goal of valid interpretation” (ix). The Sanger-Kroeber method is the most sensible technique for “the attainment of truth,” i.e. the objective realization of authorial meaning.

Sanger employed chronology, and Kroeber statistics, as “means of refining our subjective impressions” (Kroeber 239). The scientific application of their methods to literary interpretation—hypothetical deduction of authorial meaning from statistical quantification and tabulation of structural components—may provoke uneasiness in more literary-minded critics who consider “arid abstractions are out of place when it comes to art” (*Literary Theory* 207). On the other hand, the authors of *The Craft of Research*, express their support for visual devices, which help us “communicate complex data,” “discover patterns and relationships,” stimulate thinking, and organize ideas: “What would a graph look like that contrasted Macbeth’s moral development with Lady Macbeth’s? [. . .] Like other formal devices, visuals encourage you to discover ideas and relationships that you might not have seen otherwise” (197-98). “[N]ew conceptions, new analyses, new results [. . .] give more knowledge, more understanding, more insight, more control” (126) (although the Sanger-Kroeber method is actually not new). In truth, as Hirsch emphasises, there is no methodological distinction between the sciences and

the humanities:

Our self-confirming pre-understanding needs to be tested against all the relevant data we can find, for our idea of genre is ultimately a hypothesis like any other, and the best hypothesis is the one that best explains all the relevant data. This identity of genre, pre-understanding, and hypothesis suggests that the much-advertised cleavage between thinking in the sciences and the humanities does not exist. The hypothetico-deductive process is fundamental in both of them, as it is in all thinking that aspires to knowledge. (263-64)

Subjective readings will be superseded by new ones someday. But, readings based on objective data will not.

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