Aesthetic Investigations
Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics
Special Issue – Is There Truth Through Fiction?

Is Literary Fiction about Truth or Meaning?

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Abstract: In this paper, I develop an alternative account of the novel's cognitive value, based on the distinction Hannah Arendt made between truth (the result of the 'need to know') and meaning (the result of the 'need to think'), claiming that the latter is better able to explain the novel's cognitive value. To do this, I focus on a twofold movement I consider central to our experience of literary works, namely the fact that literary works always invite us to come to an interpretation of the work, but at the same time resist interpretation.

In her posthumously published work *Thinking*, Hannah Arendt addresses the fundamental question of what exactly thinking is. One of the most important claims regarding thinking that Arendt makes, is that the activity of thinking is a radically different act from the act of acquiring knowledge. Thinking, Hannah Arendt claims, is the result of the human need to give meaning and the act of thinking must therefore be understood as an ongoing process without established results. Arendt's analysis, however, not only involves making a clear distinction between the act of thinking and scientific activities that centre on the acquisition of knowledge, but also involves a claim regarding the importance of art and literature. Arendt, for instance, refers to art as 'thought-things' (p. 184) or states that Heidegger was right when he called poetry and thinking close neighbours (p.108).[1] In this way, Arendt suggests that we must understand literature, and art in general, as related to the act of thinking.

This makes it interesting to compare Arendt's ideas on thinking and literature with the contemporary debate on the cognitive value of literature.[2] Indeed, the cognitive value of literature is generally conceived as the idea that readers discover new truths or acquire new knowledge by reading works of literary fiction.[3] This is, for instance, very clear when philosophers defend a propositional theory of literary truth. Such theorists claim that readers acquire new knowledge by reading fiction because literary works, explicitly or implicitly, contain true propositions about the real world. But also when the cognitive value of literature is described as an ethical value, this is generally done in terms of the acquisition of ethical *knowledge*. Dorothy Walsh, for instance, argues that literary works offer us a distinctive kind of knowledge, namely knowledge about what it is like to.[4] In a similar way, the cognitive value of literature has also been described in terms of the acquisition or enrichment of conceptual knowledge, as was done by, for instance, Catherine Wilson.[5]

Building on Hannah Arendt's distinction between acquiring knowledge and thinking, we might, however, want to make a distinction between two different kinds of cognition: cognition in the sense of the acquisition of knowledge, on one hand and on the other, cognition in the sense of the mental processes of understanding and of making sense of the world we live in. While most theories on the cognitive value of literature seem to focus on the possibility that literary works contribute to the first kind of cognition, using Arendt's distinction might help us to show that it is rather the second kind of cognition literary works contribute to, as I aim to show in this paper.

In this paper, I therefore want to explore to what extent Hannah Arendt's account of thinking can contribute to an investigation of the novel's cognitive value. Although Arendt writes in *Thinking* that literary works must be considered as being related to the act of thinking, this idea is not really developed in her work. However, I think this idea enables us to come to a better general understanding of the workings and importance of works of literary fiction than many contemporary theories on the novel's cognitive value can offer, because their scope is often limited to particular literary genres, such as realism.[6]

To do so, I will first highlight the relevant aspects of Arendt's analysis of thinking and explain the difference between the act of thinking and the quest for knowledge. Subsequently, I will investigate how Arendt's analysis of thinking can help us to come to an understanding of the cognitive value of literature. In this investigation, I will focus on one important characteristic of literary fiction, namely the fact that it is situated in what can be considered a 'neutral space'. Whereas theories defending literary cognitivism often focus on the connection and continuity between the fictional and the real world, it is my claim that focusing on the discontinuity and on the way in which the literary work of fiction suspends direct reference to the real world offers a better starting point for a general theory on the cognitive value of literary

fiction. As I will show, it is precisely because direct reference to reality is suspended that the question arises as to what the literary work means. To illustrate this, I will use William Shakespeare's play *Othello* as an example and highlight some of the many questions that arise when reading (or watching) and interpreting this work. In this way, I will show how a text such as *Othello* invites us to give meaning to, and to make sense of, what we read, while no final meaning can be given. Moreover, I will show that this process of interpretation also affects the readers' frame of reference and their way of understanding the world. I will thus argue that the cognitive value of literary fiction must be understood as the invitation to think and ask questions, rather than as the offering of truth or knowledge, as the cognitive value of literature is generally understood.

I. HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPTION OF THINKING

As I already pointed out in the introduction, Hannah Arendt emphasises the fact that there exists an important distinction between truth and meaning, a distinction that is related to the fact that they result from two different human needs. Truth, Arendt states, is the result of the human need to know, while meaning results from the human need to think. This need to think arises from the fact that experience or perception alone is unable to offer us meaning or unity. Thinking, therefore, is asking what the existence of something *means*: through thinking we give meaning to what we experience or perceive. While our need to know can be satisfied by getting an answer to our questions, thinking essentially deals with unanswerable questions such as what the meaning of life is, what the morally right thing to do is or what a just society is. Questions such as these have emerged again and again in the history of human thought and the answers given always remain unsatisfactory. Although we know that we will never be able to define once and for all what, for instance, a just society is, we often find ourselves discussing and thinking about such ideas. Thinking therefore is necessarily self-destructive: every answer is always temporal, every answer can again be called into question. Thinking thus challenges us to question fixed ideas and in this way unfreezes frozen thought. According to Arendt, thinking therefore 'inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on these customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics'.[7] Therefore, Socrates is for Arendt the perfect example of a thinker. Rather than offering his interlocutors truth or knowledge, Socrates invites them to think and to critically examine their opinions. Socrates never comes to a fixed answer and his discussions therefore end undecided.

However, apart from the fact that the value of thinking consists of offering us questions and doubts, thinking, as we have seen, also creates something, namely *meaning*. In this way, thinking contributes to the constitution of what we can call, in phenomenological terms, our horizon, the larger context of

meaning in which any particular meaningful presentation is situated and thus the frame of reference that determines the way we 'see' the world. Though this horizon is to a certain extent stable, it is neither static nor unchanging. In the process of thinking, new meanings arise and other, previously established meanings are questioned and superseded.

One very basic example to make this clear can be found in the fact that we generally conceive the actions of other people as meaningful in some way. We do not see other people act randomly, we consider their actions to be the result of certain intentions. By ascribing such intentions to actions, we consider these actions to have a certain meaning. When you, for instance, have to wait for a long time for someone you are supposed to meet, it is possible that you assume that the fact that this person keeps you waiting means that he or she shows you little respect. However, it is possible that there might be another reason why this person keeps you waiting and that you, when you consider this possibility, come to ascribe a different meaning to this behaviour. However trivial this example may seem, it does of course show us how the meaning we ascribe to things and actions determines the way we see the world and act in it and how these meanings can be questioned and replaced by other meaningful ways to look at things. This is obviously also the case with less trivial issues, such as our ideas on justice, which are based on all sorts of assumptions, all sorts of meaningful ways in which we look at things. When some of these assumptions are questioned, when we discover new meaningful ways to look at certain things, it is of course likely that our ideas on justice will change as well.

II. LITERARY FICTION AND THE NEUTRAL SPACE

When we want to understand how the workings of literary fiction are related to thinking, as described by Arendt, we need to take a closer look at one important characteristic of works of literary fiction, namely the fact that these works are situated in what we might call a 'neutral space'. By using this term, I refer to the fact that works of literary fiction suspend the reference to the real world.[8] When reading a work of fiction, we know that the sentences we read do not describe states of affairs in the real world. When we read (or watch), for instance, Shakespeare's *Othello*, we know that Othello and Iago do not exist and that the play is not to be understood as a report of true facts. We know that the sentences we read are not meant as claims about the real world.[9] The statements we read are thus 'neutralised' by the fictional nature of the work. What we read is, indeed, fictional. Therefore, as Derrek Attridge has highlighted in his critical reading of the works of J.M. Coetzee, fiction 'is always involved in a certain avoidance of responsibility.'[10] Although it might be possible to read certain utterances in a literary work of fiction as utterances about the real world, we are not supposed to read them this way. Such statements are 'neutralised' by the fact that they appear in a

work of fiction: writers need not account for the statements they make in a work of fiction, and if somebody were tempted to make a writer account for them, the writer could always avoid doing so by referring to the fictional nature of these statements. It is important to stress this point because in the history of literature writers of course have often been held accountable for what they have written. However, it should be obvious that when, for instance, a character in a novel makes a racist remark, this does not mean that the author shares this character's view. This statement in the novel should not normally be read as a claim the author makes about the real world, but should rather be understood by referring to the context in which it appears. The reader thus has to ask what the function of such a statement in the context of the work is, which might be, for instance, showing the moral reprehensibility of the fictional character who utters it.

An interesting example to help explain what I mean, is J.M. Coetzee's lecture *The Lives of Animals*.[11] Coetzee's text, which was presented as the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, is peculiar in multiple ways. First of all, the lecture is anything but a traditional one, but rather consists of a fictional story. Furthermore, the fictional narrative itself tells the story of Elisabeth Costello, a famous writer who gives a lecture at a prestigious university in the United States. In this lecture, Costello focuses on the question of animal rights and argues that reason and philosophy have done little good to this question and that poetry is better able to foster our moral sense towards animals. Coetzee in a way intensifies Costello's statement by writing a fictional story instead of a traditional lecture, as if illustrating that the topic of his lecture can better be presented in a literary way than in a philosophical way.

Coetzee's choice is in this way both a thought-provoking one and, considering the fact that the text was presented as a *lecture*, a highly problematic one. Coetzee's choice indeed implies the possibility of arguing in favour of certain statements concerning animal rights without being held accountable for these statements. In his response to Coetzee's 'lecture', Peter Singer clearly struggles with this, resulting in a response that consists of a fictional story in which a fictionalised Singer debates Coetzee's lecture with his daughter and expresses his difficulties concerning writing a response:

> But are they Coetzee's arguments? That's just the point – that's why I don't know how to go about responding to this so-called lecture. They are *Costello's* arguments. Coetzee's fictional device enables him to distance himself from them. And he has this character, Norma, Costello's daughter-in-law, who makes all the obvious objections to what Costello is saying. It's a marvellous device, really. Costello can blithely criticise the use of reason, or the need to have any clear principles or proscriptions, without Co-

> etzee really committing himself to these claims. Maybe he really shares Norma's very proper doubts about them.[12]

As Singer's response makes clear, the problematic aspect of Coetzee's lecture, *as a lecture*, consists in its use of a fictional device and the neutralisation that comes with it. In this way, Coetzee's lecture clearly shows us something important about the workings of fiction and its ambivalent relation to speaking the truth. It is precisely the suspension of reference that causes this ambivalence.

Because of this suspension of reference, the question of what a particular work of literary fiction means arises. Because its meaning cannot be found in its direct reference to the real world and because the readers read a text in which certain artistic choices have been made, and which is composed in a certain way, a work of literary fiction invites its readers, as I will show later on in this text, to ask an infinite series of questions and to make sense of what they read. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, for instance, confronts us with different opinions considering animal rights without showing a clear preference for one of these positions, as one generally does in a philosophical text or a traditional lecture. The reader is thus invited to try to figure out what the meaning of this work is, what the possible intentions of the author were. By using the term 'possible intentions' I hope to make clear that unravelling what the meaning of a work is does not mean that one has to go looking for the *actual* intentions of the author, as extreme intentionalism claims. What I mean is that we have to see a literary work as the result of an intentional process; the words and sentences we read are not randomly generated by a computer. It is the *idea* that a work has an author that invites the reader to look for the work's meaning and thus to look for what a literary work can and possibly aims to tell us *indirectly* about the real world.

III. THE POVERTY OF FICTION

Furthermore, the question of what a literary work means arises all the more because descriptions of the characters, of their history, of the events in the story, are to a certain extent always limited. Compared to knowledge about events that took place or people that exist(ed) in the real world, of which we can say that it is potentially possible to acquire more knowledge, for instance by talking to new witnesses or by consulting other sources, acquiring such knowledge about fictional events or people outside of the given literary work is normally not possible. In one of his essays, Maurice Blanchot describes this 'poverty'[13] as the essence of fiction: because the fictional world that is presented is only accessible by reading, my knowledge about this world is always restricted to what I can read. However, by taking together different descriptions in a novel and by using external knowledge, readers often make assumptions about the characters or the events that help them to come to a better understanding of the novel. When we, for instance, read a novel

that is set in World War II, we will normally use our knowledge about this period to come to an understanding of the described events, even when this background information is not explicitly mentioned in the novel. The fact that we generally use our knowledge about the real world when coming to an understanding of the fictional world we encounter may seem to be in contradiction to the idea that fiction suspends the reference to the real world, but this is not the case. Whereas we can use our knowledge about the real world when making sense of a fictional one, this does not mean that the sentences we read in a fictional work are sentences that are meant as claims about the real world. Furthermore, readers always have to be aware of the fact that, although the fictional world they encounter seems similar to the real world, there will always be differences between the two, for instance because there are people in the fictional world that do or did not exist in the real world, which means that the assumptions readers make using their knowledge about the real world might be not correct. But because these assumptions, however well-argued they might be, remain assumptions and transcend the accessible knowledge we have about the fictional world, different well-argued assumptions and interpretations are possible and a final answer to the questions that arise when reading remains out of reach.

It is precisely this fact that literary works of fiction raise an infinite series of questions and always leave us unsatisfied with the previously given answers that makes them great works of art. The fact that the already given interpretations of a work are not able to give us completely satisfying answers to the questions the work raises results from the fact that an interpretation is meant to shed some light on a work. Shedding such light however always means highlighting some aspects of a work and therefore paying less attention to, or neglecting, others. No interpretation is able to offer us a complete understanding of a literary work of art. Literary works of art invite us to give answers to the questions they raise, although no 'true' answer can be given. Because of this impossibility to give a definitive answer, a literary work of fiction keeps inviting us to interpretation and 'haunts' the reader.[14]

As might be clear, this description of the invitation of the literary work to come to an interpretation by raising a series of questions although no true answer or interpretation exists is very similar to the description of thinking given by Hannah Arendt. As Arendt describes it, thinking is the activity directed to the creation of meaning, although no meaning is ever final and every meaning that results from thinking can always be questioned again and rethought. When interpreting a literary work and trying to grasp what a work might mean, this creation of meaning, however, is twofold. First of all, we try to comprehend what the work means by looking at its internal consistency. For instance, we formulate a theme which makes it possible to understand the work's inner logic. In this way, we come to see how the different aspects and events in the work contribute to the work as a whole. However, when doing so, our interpretation of the novel also contributes to the processes of

giving meaning in the real world. When, for instance, we try to decipher what Kafka's short story *Before the Law* means, we can, as Jacques Derrida did,[15] shed some light on this work by understanding this story about a man who faces the inaccessibility of the law as a story about the inaccessibility of the story itself. In this way, we come to an understanding of the different elements of the story and of the story's meaning. But at the same time, such an interpretation also adds something to our understanding of the nature of fiction and offers us a new, meaningful way to understand our relation to fictional stories.[16]

IV. MAKING SENSE OF KILLING DESDEMONA

To develop this idea further, I will use William Shakespeare's play *Othello, The Moor of Venice* as an example. In this play, as is well known, Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army, is deceived by his unfaithful ensign, Iago, into believing that his wife, the beautiful Desdemona, has been unfaithful, resulting in Othello killing Desdemona. At the basic level, Shakespeare's *Othello* therefore seems to tell us something about love and jealousy. But what exactly? Does the story mean that love can easily be destroyed by the poison of jealousy? This already raises the question of whether jealousy is really the motivation of Othello's act. Othello himself, for instance, seems to suggest that he acts out of a sense of duty and honour. He speaks of preventing Desdemona from betraying more men and of his murder as a 'sacrifice' and himself as an 'honourable murderer' (Act V, Scene II). Seen from this point of view, Desdemona seems to be the victim of a more general cultural context with a particular view of women and of how women should behave, rather than the victim of a purely personal tragedy.

However, when taking all this into account when interpreting Othello, we have not yet said anything about one important characteristic of Othello, namely the fact that he is a Moor. Does Othello have a racist overtone? Not only do other characters often make racist remarks about Othello, Othello's blackness can also be a metaphor for his horrible deed. While Othello is described in the first act of the play as 'far more fair than black' (Act I, Scene III), he is described as a 'black devil' (Act V, Scene II) at the end of the play, as if, by his act, Othello became what he was always meant to be. Is Othello, then, to be perceived as a less civilised, animal creature, who follows his instincts? But how can we relate that to the importance Othello gives to the notions of duty and honour? Does the play tell us that civilisation is but an illusion that merely covers up our natural instincts? Or does Othello's blackness function in a different way as a motivation for his actions, namely by being the cause of self-hate and a feeling of inferiority which makes him believe too easily that his wife would prefer another (white) man?

Furthermore, another important characteristic of Othello has not yet been taken into account, namely the fact that he is a military man and that his

actions take place against the background of a war. Is not the reason why Othello too easily trusts Iago to be found in the fact that he, as a military man, is trained to trust his fellow soldiers? Is not the way he deals with his problem, by killing Desdemona, a solution that stems from the fact that he is solely used to dealing with *military* matters? And is not Othello just as much a victim of a military-like strategy, namely Iago's? Furthermore, many parallels can be drawn between the personal relations between the different characters and the state of war they are in. Is love then to be understood as a war-like affair or does love become dangerous when regarded as such?

In a similar way, the actions and motivations of the other characters in the play give rise to many other questions. What about, for instance, Iago? What is the true reason for his hatred of Othello? Is it the fact that Othello passed him over for a promotion or rather that he suspects Othello has slept with his wife? Furthermore, why does Iago drag so many other innocent characters into his revenge? Are they just collateral damage or is there something else involved?

V. THE CREATION OF MEANING AND THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF LITERATURE

These are just some of the many questions that arise when we engage seriously with a work such as *Othello*. Many more questions can be brought forward and it is clear that they can never receive any definitive answer. It is always possible to look at the story and how the story is presented from a new perspective and this new perspective might show the lacunae in previous interpretations. Nevertheless, we, as readers, assume that the work we read has a certain meaning, just because this work is 'authored', which means that the readers presuppose that the words they are reading 'are the product of a mental event or a number of such events whereby the processes of linguistic meaning are engaged'.[17]

This, of course, does not mean that the reader must try to discover the 'true' intentions of the author, but rather that the reader must assume that the work he or she reads is the result of certain artistic choices and intentions. For instance, we hardly know anything about who William Shakespeare was, but we read his works supposing that he had certain aims when he wrote his works, that he was in a certain way communicating something. However, as I argued previously, the neutralisation that is characteristic of works of fiction makes different well-argued assumptions about, and interpretations of, the work possible. So although we presuppose that the work we read was written with a certain intention, it is impossible to discover the work's 'true' meaning.

A work such as *Othello* thus invites us to discover the possible meanings it contains. To do so, we ask ourselves what the story means by focusing on the many different aspects of the story. We ask ourselves why it matters that Othello is a Moor, why it matters that he is a military man, why it matters

that the story is set on an island against the background of a war, and so on. When trying to answer such questions and to discover the meaning of these aspects of the story for the story, we of course use our general knowledge about the world and our own experiences to come to answers. It is, for instance, only possible to engage in a reading of *Othello* where attention is given to the particular position of women in the cultural context in which the play is set, when we are already aware of the fact that the position of women in Shakespeare's time is very different from the position of women in a contemporary western society, although our society must to a certain extent also be seen as the heir of certain historically grown gender stereotypes which have still not been completely overcome. The specific position of women within the cultural context in which *Othello* is set is perhaps most clear in the text when Iago's wife Emilia testifies against her husband after Desdemona has been killed (Act V, Scene II). Emilia wants to testify, although it is proper that she obeys her husband who commands her to go home, which results in Iago killing his wife for disobeying him and telling the truth. Furthermore, the first act of the play, in which Desdemona speaks of her duties to her father and husband, also makes it clear that women are in a sense regarded as the 'property' of men and are expected to obey the man that is their guardian. We can only understand these ways of speaking and the ways the characters relate to one another when we already understand that this results from a broader cultural view of women. At the same time, engaging with the way in which women are portrayed in Shakespeare's *Othello* and with the way in which this portrayal plays a role in the development of the story, also influences and enhances our previous understanding. This is, however, not to be understood as the acquisition of knowledge or the discovery of truth: it is not the case that Shakespeare offers us a 'better' conception of gender roles or that we have learned something new about the position of women in Europe in the 17th century. Rather, reading *Othello* offers us food for thought: it offers us, for instance, a new, meaningful way to reflect upon the position of women in society.

In this way, it becomes clear why it is important to stress the fact that literary works invite us to ask an infinite series of questions. Our engagement with questions such as the importance of the position of women within the development of the story of *Othello* can never lead to a final answer, but rather gives rise to many more questions. These questions are, in the first place, meant to shed light on the work and to understand the work as a whole. We ask ourselves, for instance, how the portrayal of women contributes to the development of the story and what difference another image of women would make to this story. However, when asking these questions, the fictional story in return offers us a meaningful way to reflect upon our own frame of reference. The events presented in the story might show us that our conceptual framework falls short when trying to account for them. They might offer us a more concrete embodiment of the abstract ideas we use or offer us a new

perspective to reflect upon previous assumptions. In this way, it becomes clear that reading and interpreting literary works can be seen as a form of thinking, as described by Hannah Arendt. In the process of interpretation, we discover new, meaningful ways to encounter the world we live in and enlarge our frame of reference. We are enabled to question our previous assumptions and are offered new perspectives to look at the already familiar.

CONCLUSION

When engaging with literary works in a serious way by becoming involved with the questions they raise, it becomes clear that the cognitive value of literature should be understood as related to the way in which the literary work evokes meaning and offers food for thought by raising questions and doubts. As I have shown, this ability to raise questions is strongly related to the fact that works of literary fiction are situated in a 'neutral space' and that our knowledge about the fictional world is always restricted to what we can read. It is because our knowledge is limited and because we, as readers, assume that the work we read has a meaning, that it was written by an author with certain intentions, that the work raises many questions that invite reflection, even though these questions remain unanswerable.

Furthermore, when reflecting upon these questions we use our general knowledge about the world and our own experiences to come to answers, which also results in a transformation of our frame of reference. A work such as *Othello* can offer us meaningful ways to reflect upon not only the position of women in society, but also on, for instance, post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers, the relation between racism and self-hate or conceptions of duty and honour. Therefore, reading and interpreting a work such as *Othello* can enrich our understanding, without offering us an alternative conception or new knowledge. Reading works of literary fiction offers us instead, in line with Hannah Arendt's description of thinking, a way to unfreeze frozen thought. Precisely because works of literary fiction do not make unambiguous statements or direct statements about the real world, they offer an invitation to reflection.

In this way, it is clear that literature, as literary theorist Derek Attridge has formulated, 'solves no problems and saves no souls, ... (but that it is) *effective*, even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program'.[18] The dangers that are inherent in literature are therefore related to its cognitive value and the activity of thinking as such. As Arendt admitted, the danger of thinking resides in the fact that the questioning of all accepted doctrines and rules can also end up in the production of a reversal of the old values, and the declaration of these as 'new values'. Therefore, nihilism is a danger inherent to the activity of thinking itself, but this danger arises 'out of the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary'.[19] In a similar way, it is possible that readers stick to one inter-

pretation and are unable to be open to new or other interpretations. This is an unpredictable risk, arising from the literary work's fundamental openness and the reader's desire to make further thinking unnecessary. Although the literary work invites the reader to think, it remains up to the reader to accept this invitation. The only thing the literary work can do, is to make an appeal to the reader. An important part of literary education and of becoming familiar with literary practice should therefore consist of learning how to respond to this appeal. Only in this way can the literary work of art be appreciated appropriately and its cognitive value recognised.

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NOTES

1. Arendt 1981.
2. In this paper, I use the word 'literature' in the limited sense of 'literary fiction'.
3. For a more detailed overview of the different theories concerning the cognitive value of literature and the relation between literature and truth, see e.g. Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Davies 2007; Harold 2016.
4. Cf.Walsh 1969.
5. Wilson 1983.
6. James Harold, for instance, points out that 'literary cognitivism is not normally understood as a claim about all of literature, but about fictional narrative works, particularly ones that are "realistic"' (Harold 2016, 383). Similarly, Jukka Mikkonen has noted that 'when studying literature's ability to enlarge our understanding, the focus has traditionally been on the works' mimetic dimension: literary works are taken to offer us knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation or to see the world from a certain point (or points) of view, for instance. (...) Moreover, analytic philosophy of art (...) has investigated the cognitive gains of art typically in terms of, or derived from, truth and resemblance, favouring examples drawn from realist literature' (Mikkonen , forthcoming).
7. Arendt 1971, 434.
8. Ricoeur 1991, 128.
9. There are of course philosophers who claim that it is possible to make a distinction in a work of fiction between merely fictional utterances and utterances that do make a claim about the real world. In his article 'Truth in Literature' (Weitz 1955), Morris Weitz, for instance, claims that the reflections and commentaries Marcel Proust offers in his novel *Remembrance of Things Past* can be read as statements about the real world. More recently, Kathleen Stock has defended the view that a reader 'seamlessly and relatively automatically understands both what one is supposed to imagine and what one is supposed to believe' (Stock 2016, 82). However, as I argue in this text, such a view strongly underestimates the fact that the reference to the real world of such sentences is neutralised because they are embedded in a work of fiction and because of the avoidance of responsibility that is related to this neutralisation.
10. Attridge 2004a, 149.
11. Coetzee 1999.
12. Singer 1999, 91.
13. Blanchot 1995, 75.
14. For a further elaboration of this idea, see Verheyen 2018.
15. Derrida 1992, 181-220.
16. For a more detailed exploration of this example, see Verheyen 2018.
17. Attridge 2004b, 101. Derrek Attridge describes the notion of 'authoredness' by stating that 'to read a text in the fullest sense – in contrast to mechanically decoding it – is to treat it not as a static assemblage of words but as the "written," or even better – because it captures the unending activity involved – as *a writing*.

> There are texts that demand only decoding, texts that carry no implication of having been written. (...) But most of what I read, I read as writing, which is to say as words which have in some sense been chosen and arranged. This choosing and arranging can, and of course very often does, lack any particular creativity. Where it is, or rather can in a creative reading be taken to be, creative – in the sense I have given the term – it seems appropriate to call the written object a *work*, suggesting as this word does the labor that went into its creation. In this it corresponds well with the double meaning of "invention." By contrast, "text" (as Roland Barthes liked to remind his readers) suggests an unauthored weave of linguistic signs, and seems more appropriate for the vast quantity of uncreative writing.' (Attridge 2004b, 103).

18. Attridge 2004b, 4.
19. Arendt 1971, 435.

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