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Reading for Opacity and the Cognitive Value of Literary Fiction

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Abstract: In this article I intend to articulate the cognitive value of literary fiction in accordance with Peter Lamarque's opacity thesis, avoiding the pitfall of formalism to which the opacity thesis risks being reduced. In the first part, I discuss the problems of the distinction between opacity and transparency in the case of literary fiction. In the second part, I thematise the reader's interest in reading literary fiction and analyse it in terms of an interest at a distance. This examination enables me to articulate the cognitive value of literary fiction as intrinsic to the reader's experience. The main argument in support of this approach is based on an observation that I borrow from Roman Ingarden's reflections on the literary artwork, according to which the reader's focus on the literary fictional narrative as a whole is what distinguishes the experience of reading literary fiction from reading other kinds of texts.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine the question of how cognition is involved in the experience of literary fiction. This examination differs from the question concerning the truth value of literary fiction. The latter has dominated the stakes in the contemporary debate, opposing the no-truth theory to those defending the truth value of literary fiction in terms of subjective knowledge theory or in

terms of moral philosophy.[1] Although the no-truth theory provides good arguments against its opponents in rejecting the instrumentalisation of literary fiction that the latter seem to take for granted, I consider that the reduction of the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction to its truth value obscures a broader view of the experience of literary fiction, in particular the aesthetic, poetic and cognitive aspects of this experience and their interplay.[2]

The question: 'In what way is cognition involved in the experience of literary fiction?' is not new. Roman Ingarden dedicated a whole book to this issue, *Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks* (1968). However, it is not my intention to summarise or actualise the results of Ingarden's examination. My starting point, from which I revisit elements of Ingarden's work, is the opacity thesis, which I borrow from Peter Lamarque's book, *The Opacity of Narrative* (2014). The opacity thesis states that in the case of literary fiction, 'the events and characters that make up the content are *constituted* by the mode of their presentation in the narrative'.[3] Through his use of italics, Lamarque draws particular attention to the notion of being 'constituted' in order to clarify that the relation between the mode of presentation and the content, as expressed by the opacity thesis, is not relative but intrinsic in the case of literary fiction.

In the first part of this article, I argue that the opacity thesis changes the debate about the cognitive value of literary fiction, and I examine how it presents challenging new questions about this issue. From this perspective, in the second part, I examine the experience to which literary fiction gives rise, focussing in particular on one feature of this experience in which, as I intend to show, the aesthetic and the cognitive dimensions are jointly involved. I approach this aspect by examining the interest the reader has in reading literary fiction. This interest, I argue, is marked by a distance and I describe the different ways in which this distance specifies the experience of literary fiction.

I will not go into certain preliminary aspects of the debate on the cognitive value of literary fiction. I take it for granted that the experience of literary fiction necessarily presupposes linguistic competencies and familiarity with the language in which the literary fiction is written. I define literary fiction in terms of a written (or recited) narrative which represents a fictional world. Let us take this definition as a starting point for the following examination.

I. OPACITY THESIS AND THE THEORY OF LITERARY FICTION

Peter Lamarque considers opacity to be 'a prominent feature of literary fictional narratives'.[4] I call this view the 'opacity thesis' and my intention is to examine in what way this thesis contributes to a theory of literary fiction. It may not come as a surprise that it changes the debate on the cognitive value of literary fiction by drawing attention to the reading experience. In fact,

the opacity thesis considers the reading experience as an a priori condition for any proposition about the cognitive value of literary fiction; for, if the content of literary fiction is constituted by the mode of presentation of events and characters in the narrative, as Lamarque argues, then the question concerning the cognitive relevance of literary fiction can only be addressed by paying particular attention to the linguistic, stylistic and narrative means of presenting a content. As such, the opacity thesis is clearly opposed to the reductive operations characteristic of the propositional theory of literary truth, which claims that 'literary works are construed as having the constitutive aim of advancing truths about human concerns by means of general propositions implicitly or explicitly contained in them'.[5]

However, the relevance of the opacity thesis to the debate on the cognitive value of literary fiction appears in a more radical form when confronted with the subjective knowledge theory. According to this theory, the reader acquires knowledge from engagement with literary fiction, not in the sense of receiving information about something (knowing *that*), but in the sense of living through the experience of what it is like to be in a situation of a particular kind, as described by the narrative of literary fiction.[6] According to this view, the way in which the experience is described in literary fiction is important and requires literary means of expression, since the possibility of the reader living through the experience of what it is like depends on the expressive and authentic qualities of the description of this experience. It seems, then, that the subjective knowledge theory of literary fiction accepts the basic principle of the opacity thesis and may be considered as an elaboration of this thesis in literary theory. However, this is not the case insofar as the subjective knowledge theory confuses the experience of reading literary fiction, which describes a situation using a narrative, with having an actual experience of this situation. Moreover, it fails to consider the experience of reading literary fiction as an experience *sui generis* and to analyse the specific literary interest the reader has in reading literary fiction.[7]

Rejecting both the propositional and subjective knowledge theories, it becomes clear how the opacity thesis changes the debate on the cognitive value of literary fiction. In fact, it refuses any reduction of the experience of literary fiction to a concept of knowledge external to this experience and it invites a re-examination of the cognitive value of literary fiction within this experience and in connection with the literary value attributed to literary fiction. In this sense, the opacity thesis changes the stakes of the debate by transforming the focus on what kind of knowledge is conveyed by literary fiction into a preliminary question concerning the kind of experience to which literary fiction invites the reader. In doing so, it appears to understand literary fiction primarily as an aesthetic experience, to which the question concerning its cognitive value is subordinated.

Precisely on this last point, however, the opacity thesis runs the risk of being unsuitable as a theory of literary fiction, as long as it does not clarify

what kind of interest and what kind of cognition are involved in reading literary fiction. It may seem that it overlooks the cognitive relevance of reading fiction altogether and that it falls back into a kind of formalism. Let us briefly consider the issues.

First, formulated in terms of its general claim, the opacity thesis seems to state something trivial. It draws attention to the indivisibility of form and content in the case of literary fictional narratives. That the mode of presentation is constitutive of the content of the narrative means that expression in literary fiction cannot be substituted by another expression without running the risk of changing the content of the narrative. It is clear that this formulation of the opacity thesis obstructs any attempt to define the cognitive value of literary fiction by means of a general proposition or a conceptual redescription, as occurs, for example, in judgments such as: 'in Franz Kafka's *The trial* human beings are victims of impersonal and indifferent forces outside their control'.[8] It is also clear that this formulation of the opacity thesis is able to draw a sharp distinction between literary fiction and philosophical discourse, to which the indivisibility of form and content does not apply. One can ask, however, whether this thesis of the indivisibility of form and content can be considered a distinctive feature of literary fiction and whether it does not appear in different linguistic contexts whenever metaphors, rules or fixed expressions are used. Moreover, one can also argue that the indivisibility of form and content does not hold true in the case of literary fiction. It is possible to translate a novel or to summarise a novel's plot and judge the quality of the novel's translation or plot summary with regard to their adequacy to the content of the novel's original form. Some novels, such as Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, have explicitly challenged the idea of the indivisibility of form and content by presenting the same events from different perspectives.

The opacity thesis does not seem, therefore, to be either a sufficient or necessary condition for defining a central feature of literary fiction. As a result, the opacity thesis has been reformulated to be understood as qualifying the experience of reading literary fiction. If it is possible to say that there are degrees of opacity in literary fiction and that opacity increases, as Lamarque argues, 'to the extent that the content of the narrative is deemed – under certain interests and no doubt under increasingly fine-grained specification – to be dependent on the manner of its presentation', one may conclude that opacity is interest-relative.[9] In this case, opacity is less an intrinsic quality of a kind of text, than an interest brought to the text, and the opacity thesis consists in claiming that, in the context of literary fiction, the reader reads for opacity insofar as the reader is interested in the experience of literary fiction. This reformulation of the opacity thesis need not contradict the previous one, if one accepts that the specific attention given to the precise manner in which the content is presented is constitutive of the literary value of literary fiction.

In order to fully understand the implications of this reformulation of the opacity thesis, it is important to recall the distinction that Lamarque makes between opacity and transparency. While reading for opacity is an essential feature of the experience of reading literary fiction and constitutive of the appreciation of its literary value, reading for transparency is not. Whereas particular attention to the specific manner in which the narrative's content is presented is an intrinsic feature of reading for opacity, reading for transparency is defined as an interest in the narrative's content identity. Lamarque uses the term 'substitution of identity' to clarify this. The term is meant to establish an equivalence between transparency and extensionality, which, in the case of literary fiction, as Lamarque underlines, is not preservation of truth but preservation of narrative content.[10] In other words, one narrative is more transparent than another if the reader is more interested in identifying the narrative's content as the same content, whatever might have replaced the narrative's original form. If the narrative's content remains unaffected despite the substitution of some of its literary qualities, the narrative is more transparent than another in which this is not the case. While narratives are complex entities, it is possible to respond in different ways to these complexities, either by situating their meaning in the broader frame of the narrative as a whole, or by examining their meaning in connection with the concrete manner in which the narrative is presented. A reader who is reading for transparency might thus be interested in defining the content of Kafka's *The Trial* with the general proposition that 'human beings are victims of impersonal and indifferent forces outside their control', but a reader who is reading for opacity is more interested in following the destiny of the main character Josef K. in order to fine-tune their understanding of the meaning of the novel.[11]

In this regard, it is obvious that the distinction between opacity and transparency delineates two different ways of relating to literary fiction, but only the former can be said to account for the experience of reading literary fiction. The distinction, therefore, supports the view that the cognitive value of literary fiction is intrinsic to the experience of reading literary fiction and that it is not adequately understood when reading for opacity is confused with reading for transparency. However, it could be asked whether it is possible to separate the two ways of relating to literary fiction in the actual reading process. It is not clear how a fine-grained examination of the manner in which the novel's content is presented can arise without – at least implicitly – the reader's awareness of (or search for) the novel's content as the same content. Re-readings, recapitulations, reformulations, thought experiments or content examinations following alternative chronologies (to one prescribed in chapters or events) and other kinds of substitution can support the reader's sensitivity to opacity. In other words, the cognitive relevance intended by reading for transparency can at any time play a role in the experience of reading literary fiction. Moreover, it is not yet clear in what way reading for opacity enables literary theory to better understand the cognitive value of literary fiction.

In fact, by focusing on the reading experience, the opacity thesis treats the cognitive value of literary fiction as a literary value, but it does not seem to be able to distinguish the cognitive value from other literary values that the reader attributes to literary fiction. It is here that the risk of formalism is the most apparent. While reading for opacity implies the reader's attention to the specific manner in which the content is presented, the cognitive value of literary fiction risks being reduced to the reader's capability to recognise the literary qualities and intricacies of expression. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether this corresponds with the reader's interest in reading literary fiction, and whether it is not necessary to include the reader's capability to respond to literary fiction, in order to distinguish the cognitive value from other values attributed to literary fiction. However, in opposing opacity to transparency, the opacity thesis seems unable to do this or to articulate how the cognitive value of literary fiction arises from the reading experience.

With regard to the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction, it thus does not seem possible to separate opacity from transparency or transparency from opacity in a non-equivocal way. This does not imply that the conceptual distinction between the two is unfruitful. Opacity draws attention to the importance of the experience of reading literary fiction to address the question of its cognitive value. Transparency draws attention to the importance of the content identity of literary fiction to support the answer to that question. One could say that in the case of literary fiction, transparency without opacity is empty and opacity without transparency is blind. Without the former, it is not possible to thematise the content of the interest in reading literary fiction; without the latter, it is not possible to appreciate the literary value of literary fiction. As a result, we need to analyse the manner in which content is identified within the experience of reading literary fiction to answer the question of its cognitive value.

II. INTEREST AT A DISTANCE

Let us now turn to the experience of reading literary fiction. I approach this experience assuming that the reader of literary fiction has a particular interest in reading literary fiction. How can this interest be described?

There are many texts that may appeal to the interest of the reader, but only some do so by presenting themselves as literary fiction. To distinguish the reader's interest as specific to literary fiction, it is important to take into account the relation of the reader's interest to the distinctive qualities of literary fiction. In this way, it is possible, from the start, to avoid the confusion between an interest in reading literary fiction and an interest in reading for information. The majority of texts are read to obtain information, such as scientific reports, abstracts, daily newspapers, Wikipedia pages, dictionaries, historical documents, laws, judgments, arguments, biographies, and others. The main feature of this kind of interest in reading texts is to

extend knowledge on a specific given issue. The two aspects are important. Reading for information requires that the reader already has some knowledge about a matter and intends to apply, extend or develop this knowledge. If I am interested in reading a newspaper article on the last elections in the United States, for instance, it is presupposed that I know what elections are, that I know that elections recently took place in the United States, that I am familiar with the political opposition between Republicans and Democrats in the United States, that I have an idea of (or an opinion about) the political situation in the United States, and so on. Moreover, my interest in reading the newspaper article implies that I am willing to test (and, if necessary, correct) what I already know, to adapt my view on this matter and to enrich my understanding of it on the basis of the additional information I obtain by reading the newspaper. Similarly, I might be interested in reading a biography of Philip Roth. This interest requires that I already know who Philip Roth is; for instance, I know that he is an American, that he wrote stories, that he is the author of *American Pastoral*, that he won the Pulitzer Prize, that he recently died, etc., and it also requires that I intend to know more about his concrete life and work.

It is important to note that the interest I have in reading for information does not primarily depend on whether the knowledge I had before reading, or the new information I gain through reading, is right or wrong. I might still be interested in reading about the details of Philip Roth's life even if the information I obtain about his marriage or about the success of his first novel is highly disputable. Although the presentation of these facts might be suggestive, tendentious or simply wrong, my reading for information is defined by an interest in matters of fact.

In the case of reading literary fiction, the reader's interest is different. Literary fictional narrative, by its very essence, does not intend to present or develop knowledge about matters of fact. Therefore, the two requirements mentioned above are not relevant in the case of reading literary fiction. I do not need any knowledge about the author, Philip Roth, or about the political context of the United States to start reading *I Married a Communist* as a literary fictional narrative, and it does not make sense to presuppose a willingness to test or enrich the knowledge I do not have. Of course, I may have, in many different ways, an interest in reading literary fiction in order to develop or enrich the knowledge I already have. It is possible that I am familiar with the work of Philip Roth but have never read *I Married a Communist* and that I want to know whether the stylistic features that appear in this novel are the same as in other narratives by Roth. In contrast, I may be interested in the meaning of the word 'communist' as Roth understands it, and therefore want to look up all the occurrences of this word in his novels. However, this kind of interest is not directed to the literary fictional narrative of Roth's story as such.

It therefore seems that if we want to approach the experience of literary fiction, we should first of all move away from any interest in obtaining information (about matters of fact in the real world, such as the life or the psychology of the author) from a narrative. As Ingarden states, as long as we read literary fictional narratives as instruments which convey information, we fail to consider them as literary artworks.[12] The experience of literary fiction requires an open, explorative, but non-informative attitude, which is not interested in subordinating the narrative's propositional content to cognitive goals external to the reading experience. In this way, it already becomes clear why it is important to consider the experience of reading literary fiction as an interest at a distance: it requires first of all bracketing (or keeping at a distance) all knowledge claims while reading fiction.

Another feature of the experience of reading literary fiction clarifies, in a more radical way, why the interest in reading fiction involves a kind of distance. A literary fictional narrative is multilayered: it combines different expressive, stylistic, rhythmic, figurative, temporal, semantic, logical and referential dimensions. The reader's attention is not limited to one of these layers but, on the contrary, is triggered by and directed to the interaction and connection between them. For this reason, it is generally accepted that the experience of literary fiction should be considered as a complex whole.[13] The importance of wholeness to the experience of reading literary fiction is acknowledged in the contemporary debate about literary fiction. In 'Imagination and Fiction', for example, Kathleen Stock argues that 'the correct focus [of reading a literary fictional narrative] is the text as a whole'.[14] The notion of the 'whole' enables her to distinguish between imagination and belief, and by extension between fictional and non-fictional narratives, or aspects of them. Literary fictional narratives invite the reader to imagine its content (and not to believe in the related event) and it is precisely for that reason that the reader's focus is directed to the narrative as a whole. While 'parts of a fictional text can be believed true by the reader (and be true, and included for truth-related reasons), *the whole* cannot. For this would normally make it impossible for the reader to imagine its content'.[15]

In a traditional formalist approach, the notion of a whole is understood as the pre-given enclosing form of the literary artwork.[16] However, this approach cannot account for the reader's experience. From the reader's perspective, the whole of the literary fictional narrative is not given and never given as such for the duration of the reading experience. This means that the reader, while reading literary fiction and focusing on the connection and interaction between the different layers in the fictional narrative, does not have the whole at their disposal in order to define, fix or enclose this interaction. In other words, from the reader's perspective, the literary fictional narrative as a whole is always at a distance, even though the reader's attention is directed to it.

What is said here in a general way about the reader's interest in literary fiction can be elaborated in more detail by pointing to some essential features

of the reading experience. If it is correct to say that the focus of reading a literary fictional narrative is the text as a whole, then the reader's interest in reading literary fiction is not satisfied by or limited to the content of one, or some, propositions in, or about, the fictional narrative. The reader's interest is directed beyond the proposition read (and the propositional content) toward propositions that follow or preceded, and there is no single sentence in the narrative that may stop this movement of attention that is given to the narrative as a whole. In this way, reading literary fiction differs from reading for information. A reader who wants to obtain information from a text is looking for the propositional content which fulfils the cognitive intention of reading. From this perspective, it is evident that sentences are evaluated with regard to their importance in relation to obtaining the required information, identifying those which add to the knowledge already acquired and distinguishing them from others which are not. This kind of evaluation does not qualify the reader's experience of literary fiction, where every sentence, or even every single sign, may count. The reason for this is simple: the meaning of a sentence in – and more generally, its contribution to – a fictional narrative depends on the other sentences in the narrative. The trivial sentence: 'He is looking through the window' in a narrative by Franz Kafka may receive a non-trivial (and even dense) significance which the reader can only discover through the experience of reading the fictional narrative as a whole; for example, 'he is witnessing a murder'.[17]

That the reader's interest in literary fiction is directed beyond the single proposition, toward the fictional narrative as a whole does not mean that the reader's attention is limited to discovering the propositional content of each successive sentence (until the final sentence at the end of the text). The focus on the fictional narrative as a whole changes the way the reader attends to the propositional content of each sentence.

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach to literary fiction can help us to adequately describe this change and to better understand the movement of attention that leads beyond the single proposition in the experience of reading literary fiction. In *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, he points to the alteration of reference in literary fictional narratives. He defines 'reference' in line with Frege's notion of 'Bedeutung', the 'about what' of a proposition.[18] Reference leads the sentence beyond itself: it relates language to the world and enables the identification of an individual in the factual world. In oral language, reference relies on 'monstration': the references included through demonstratives, adverbs of time and place, and the tenses of the verb are defined by the dialogical situation common to the speaker and the listener and may be supported by gestural indication. This possibility of monstration disappears in written texts. However, descriptive, non-fictional writing, such as diaries, letters, travel reports, historical narratives and testimonies, intend to restore the ostensive reference of oral discourse and may do so 'thanks to the ordinary procedures of identi-

fication [...], the unique spatio-temporal network to which both writer and reader belong and which they both acknowledge.'[19] In other words, in descriptive non-fictional texts, the writer intends each written sentence to be read as an utterance of the writer and it remains possible for the reader to thus define its reference in accordance with the writer's situation. The reader is able to locate a determinable historical time and place, and in this way identify the intention of the writer through each written sentence. This potential disappears in literary fictional narratives, that is – as Ricoeur specifies – 'in narratives that are not descriptive reports where a narrative time, expressed by specific tenses of the verbs, is displayed by and within the narrative without any connection to the unique space-time network common to ostensive and non-ostensive description.'[20]

At first sight, Ricoeur seems to be saying something trivial, which Roman Jakobson has called the priority of the poetic function of language at the expense of its referential function in literary fiction. However, the specificity of the reader's interest in literary fiction is not sufficiently clarified by pointing to its focus on the poetic or literary qualities of language. These qualities may be equally present in non-fictive descriptions. Ricoeur's approach sheds more precise light on the reader's interest in reading literary fiction. The movement of attention that leads beyond the proposition toward the narrative as a whole has its origin in the impossibility of defining the referential function of the proposition in fictional narratives in a non-ambiguous way. The reader's interest in reading literary fiction concerns this change of reference. The reader's attention is freed from the limitations of 'the procedures of identification' that enable them to understand a written sentence as an utterance of the writer, and to define the reference of the utterance in relation to the factual world, as is the case in a non-fictional ostensive or descriptive context. In this regard, it is the experience of a certain absence – the absence of a referential matching of the proposition to the factual world – that triggers the reader's attention in fictional narratives, provoking an ongoing search for meaning beyond each sentence, which is directed toward the narrative as a whole.

In the wake of Aristotle's adage that poetics is closer to philosophy than history is, it is often stated and generally accepted that literary fiction deals with a possible world and not with the factual world. However, this distinction as such does not clarify why we are interested in reading literary fiction. We may be interested in a thought experiment – that includes the representation of a possible world – for completely different reasons to reading literary fiction; for example, because we want to test the value of an argument that we acknowledge, and in the frame of which the thought experiment has been formulated. In fact, the formulation of a thought experiment is still, or can in principle be, connected to a non-fictive common situation. In addition, and in reverse, the reader may be interested in reading a work as literary fiction despite the writer including careful descriptions of experiences he or she had

in the factual world within the fictional narrative. In other words, the fictional character of a narrative as a whole does not depend on whether each experience described in the narrative is part of an exclusively non-factual, possible world. The distinction between possible and factual (worlds) is not sufficient to identify the specific interest of the reader in literary fiction. It is therefore necessary to further examine how the change of reference in literary fiction concerns the reading experience.

The impossibility – mentioned above – of defining the referential function of a proposition in a fictional narrative in a non-ambiguous way implies that a proposition in a story is not and cannot be understood as an utterance or a speech act of the writer. The proposition in literary fiction is freed, so to speak, from the situational constraints and limitations which might define the writer's intention. In the experience of reading literary fiction, the reader does not understand the sentences in the story as the expression of the here and now of the writer. The sentences are given to the reader without the sender being identified. What narrative theory calls 'the narrator' and/or 'the narrative voice', deals with this aspect of the reading experience. A sentence in a fictional story presents a content to the reader without manifesting the intention with which, the perspective from which, and the context in which, the sentence was formulated. The narrator and/or the narrative voice are the names of this void, which accompanies each sentence within the fictional narrative, despite the narrator possibly being designated in the first person in the story. What we call here the 'void' does not mean that a sentence in a fictional narrative has no intention, no perspective and no context, but that these are not evidently given or identifiable in literary fiction. In this respect, they must be examined, discovered and interpreted through the reading experience.

Based on this well-known narrative condition of literary fiction, some cognitive features of the reading experience can be articulated more precisely. First, it is possible to say something more about the reader's interest in reading literary fiction. This interest is qualified by the search to fill the void, to explore the context within the fictional narrative, to identify the perspective of the narrator and/or narrative voice, and to wonder what the fictional narrative precisely intends to draw our attention to. These different, although complementary directions of the reader's interest in reading literary fiction require skills and competencies, such as being sensitive to the mostly implicit relations between reasons and beliefs, between motives and actions, between characters and values; being able to differentiate between significance and insignificance, between goals and means, between norms and facts, between evaluative and descriptive expressions; and being able to reflect on the connection between these aspects and their consequences, on the kind of world that is represented in this way, and whether or not and to what extent the meaning of this world is intended as such. It might be clear by now why

the reader's interest in literary fiction is not adequately described as mere attention to poetic and literary qualities of language.

Second, it is possible to say something more about the reader's attention that is directed beyond the proposition toward the narrative as a whole. The focus on the narrative as a whole defines the role of the imagination in reading literary fiction. The narrative as a whole is to be imagined. It is not something that finally appears at the end of the narrative with the final sentence, or that manifests itself through the plot, which integrates characters and actions within a narrative unity. In other words, to imagine the narrative as a whole is an intrinsic feature of the experience of reading literary fiction. It transforms this reading experience into an ongoing exploration, not only of the multiple connections between sentences composing the fictional narrative but also of the consistency and valorisation of the imagined content. In non-fictive narratives, the reader's attention is directed to, and satisfied by, the descriptions of the narrated events, which are understood as true or faithful expressions of the writer's experience or research (e.g., as in travel reports, testimonies, historical documents). If the narrative as a whole comes into play in the case of reading non-fiction, it is in order to validate or to question the descriptive intention of the narrative, or because literary means of fictional narratives (e.g., a plot structure) have been used in presenting the narrated events.

A similar change, but in the opposite direction, may occur in the experience of reading literary fiction. Although a narrative may present itself as fictional and invite the reader to imagine its content and explore the narrative as a whole, the reader may come to acknowledge through the reading experience that the narration is written as an autobiographical report of events in the factual world and that the perspective of the narrator is identical with the writer's expressions in daily life (e.g., in the novel *I.M.* by Conny Palmen or the novels of Karl Ove Knausgard). In this case, the reader's interest in reading literary fiction will be deceived. However, this possibility shows that the reader's attention to the narrative as a whole in the case of literary fictional narratives is not exclusively focused on the use of literary means, but also remains directed to the referential means of language in narratives. It is thus necessary to recall attention to the narrative as a whole in order to understand that reading for opacity is not necessarily opposed to reading for transparency, but that both are integrated into the experience of reading literary fictional narratives.

Finally, another important consequence concerning the reading experience can be drawn from the narrative condition of literary fiction mentioned above. If it is the case, as was argued, that the reader's interest in literary fiction is qualified by a kind of distance with regard to the narrative, and if, moreover, the reader's response to this distance is to imagine the narrative as a whole, it follows that the reader's own experience has a privileged significance in the experience of reading literary fiction. Without doubt, and as a matter

of fact, descriptions of experiences or events in literary fictional narratives do not refer to the reader's own experience or to real events in the reader's life. However, it is the reader who is invited to imagine the content of the narrative as a whole, and this means that it is the reader who fills in the many undefined connections between the propositions of the fictional narrative. It is the reader who represents the fictional world as explored through the process of reading the narrative as a whole, and who evaluates the aesthetic, poetic and cognitive qualities of this exploration, as well as the consistency, relevance and meaningfulness of the world discovered through this exploration, and the intrinsic and extrinsic features of the literary fictional narrative.

The reader's own experience is implied in the process of reading literary fiction in two different ways. On the one hand, it guides this process and is engaged in the activity of imagination, which contributes to the selection of the relevant connections between propositions, defines the content of the reading experience, and delivers vivid imaginaries of the unfamiliar. On the other hand, the reader's experience is itself at stake in the reading process, in the sense of becoming manifest, being discovered and ultimately questioned. In the reading process, the reader finds him or herself feeling sympathy, or not, with a character; feeling happiness or sadness about the character's destiny; being disgusted or attracted to the description of the interaction between two characters; agreeing with or rejecting the central convictions and beliefs ascribed to a character; reflecting on or being captivated by the reasons that may explain the character's emotions and actions; or anticipating or lacking interest in the ending of the story.

In this regard, reading literary fiction is always a kind of self-exploration; an exploration which, on the one hand, presupposes various cognitive and linguistic competencies based on the reader's own experience of the world and their interactions in the world, but which, on the other hand, manifests to the reader their own fantasies, feelings, emotions, convictions, beliefs and representations with regard to fictional entities. For this reason, it is possible to describe this exploration as a practice, the goal of which is not be informed, but to imagine, to reflect and to evaluate, and it is not erroneous to ascribe a cognitive relevance to this practice, including a learning effect, insofar as it addresses the reader's competencies in understanding meanings, stimulates the creativity of the imagination, triggers the act of evaluation, increases awareness about the many facets of their own singular experience of living in a human world, and the complexity of its linguistic expression. However, it would be incorrect to overestimate this learning as a new way of conceptualising the world,[21] or as the achievement of a new knowledge concerning what it is like to be in the situation narrated by a fictional story,[22] or as the exercise of a practical wisdom that learns from literary fiction how to apply moral rules to concrete cases in real life.[23] The problem with this cognitive overestimation of literary fiction is that it does not account for the reader's

interest in reading literary fiction as such, the intention of which is not to discover a new idea, or to acquire knowledge about the other's sensibility, or to apply moral rules.

The naivety of these views is most apparent in the presupposition that the cognitive value of literary fiction can be measured by a change in the reader's relation to the real world beyond the experience of reading literary fiction. However, there is no evidence for this kind of change. As I have argued in this section, in the experience of literary fiction, the reader's interest is freed from the limitations of the ostensive and descriptive references in the case of factual contexts and is directed to the narrative as a whole. The claim that the reader who enjoys reading literary fiction responds to this experience by adapting their own convictions about the real world, or by understanding the other person better, or by learning how to morally decide in the context of the lifeworld, mistakes the reader's response to literary fiction and fails to account for the cognitive value that is intrinsic to the reading experience itself.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By no means did I intend to give a full account of the experience of reading literary fiction in this article. The intention was more limited, addressing the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction based on Peter Lamarque's opacity thesis. It is my contention that the opacity thesis draws attention to the reader's experience of literary fiction and invites a reconsideration of the cognitive value of literary fiction within this experience. To this end, I addressed the question of the reader's interest in reading literary fiction and described this as an interest at a distance. In accordance with the opacity thesis, the notion of 'distance' emphasises that the interest in reading literary fiction is related to the intrinsic value of the experience of reading literary fiction. In doing so, it was possible to distinguish the reader's interest in literary fiction from an interest in reading for information. Furthermore, it was possible to clarify the kind of distance that is involved in the experience of reading literary fiction by means of Roman Ingarden's and Kathleen Stock's observations, both of which suggest that a focus on the literary narrative as a whole distinguishes the experience of reading literary fiction from that of reading non-fictional narratives. I argued that this focus on the narrative as a whole leads beyond a propositional understanding of the experience of literary fiction.

While, as Paul Ricoeur has shown, the propositional content in literary fictional narrative is freed from the limitations imposed by ostensive and descriptive references in the case of factual context, the narrative as a whole is not given to the reader as such and never definable in terms of a proposition. Consequently, the reader's interest in reading literary fiction is triggered by the search to fill in the referential indeterminacies which accompany each

sentence in a literary fictional narrative. In other words, literary fictional narratives invite the reader to explore the context and development of meanings within the fictional narrative as a whole, to examine the narrator's intended perspectives within the narrative's modes of presentation, and to discover, interpret and evaluate the content to which the fictional narrative as a whole intends to draw attention. In this way, the examination of the reader's interest in literary fiction in terms of an interest at a distance enabled the articulation of the cognitive value of literary fiction in accordance with the opacity thesis and allowed us to avoid the pitfalls of formalism, to which the opacity thesis risks being reduced. In the case of literary fiction, the reader's attention to the narrative's modes of presentation implies (and is supported by) the reader's focus on content identity regarding the narrative as a whole and vice versa. This outcome may help to better understand how cognitive, aesthetic and poetic aspects of literary fiction are intertwined in the experience of reading literary fiction.

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NOTES

1. Wilson 2003, Nussbaum 2003.
2. Lamarque and Olsen 2003.
3. Lamarque 2014, p. 3.
4. Lamarque 2014, p. 3.
5. Lamarque and Olsen 2003, p. 341.
6. Cf. Walsch 1969 and Wilson 2003.
7. Cf. Lamarque and Olsen 2003, p. 342-349.
8. Lamarque 2009, p. 236.
9. Lamarque 2014, p. 11.
10. Lamarque 2014, p. 9.
11. Lamarque 2009, p. 236.
12. Ingarden 1968, p. 80-82.
13. Cf. Ingarden 1968, §13a, p. 72-90.
14. Stock 2017, p. 214.
15. Stock 2017, p. 213.
16. Cf. Levine 2015, p. 24.
17. Cf. Kafka 1989, p. 135.
18. Cf. Ricoeur 1976, p. 19-20.
19. Ricoeur 1976, p. 35.
20. Ricoeur 1976, p. 36.
21. Ricoeur 1991.
22. Wilson 2003.
23. Nussbaum 2003.

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