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Special Issue – Is There Truth Through Fiction?

The Cognitive Value of Literary Fiction. An Introduction.

Author

ARTHUR COOLS &
LEEN VERHEYEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

One of the most important debates within the philosophy of literature concerns the cognitive value of literature and whether this value must be considered crucial for literary appreciation. Generally, the cognitive value of literature is understood in terms of truth and knowledge. In this way, literature is often brought into competition with science. One can argue, for example, as did Morris Weitz and John Hospers, among others, that literature offers us truth in the same way that science does, namely by offering the reader propositions that can be judged for their truth value.¹ According to this view, just like scientific work, literature may contain true propositions about, for example, the human condition or the world in which we live. This can be done explicitly, when a reader acquires knowledge about, for example, the historical period in which a story is set, or when they learn something about life by reading a phrase such as ‘all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players’.² Furthermore, a novel can also convey this knowledge in an implicit way, with true propositions being derived from the novel’s theme.

However, the propositional theory of literary truth faces many problems. The most significant is that the propositions which can be found explicitly or implicitly in literary works are often not meant to be true propositions about

the real world, but have a certain function within the work of art. When, for example, a character in a novel makes a statement about the world, this statement is often used to tell us something about this character, rather than about the real world.

An alternative to the propositional theory of literary truth consists in claiming that we acquire a particular kind of knowledge by reading literary works, a kind of knowledge we cannot acquire through science. Dorothy Walsh, for example, claimed that literary works teach us what it is like to be in a certain situation.³ Similarly, Martha Nussbaum stated that by reading literary works we develop our ability ‘to see the full humanness of the people with whom our encounters in daily life are especially likely to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes’.⁴ In this way, literature is said to provide us with knowledge about what the world looks like from a different perspective to our own. Furthermore, one can also claim, as was done by Catherine Wilson,⁵ that we can acquire conceptual knowledge by reading literature. According to this view, we can enrich the conceptual knowledge we already have concerning notions such as love or honour, by being confronted with alternative interpretations of that concept in a novel.

The main difficulties with these theories is that they only seem to apply to certain literary works, and therefore seem to be unable to provide an account that is adequate to literary fiction in general. Moreover, they run the risk of instrumentalising literary works, evaluating them in terms of an external moral or conceptual aim, and in this way reducing or subordinating the aesthetic value of literary fiction to the latter.

Another possible way to explain the novel’s cognitive value is by using an alternative conception of truth, such as that found in hermeneutic philosophy. Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer have claimed that ‘truth as correspondence’ is not the only possible way to talk about truth, and that truth can also be understood in a more dynamic way – as an event, or something that happens. Another conception of truth can be found in the theories of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, where truth is understood as related to the critique of the ruling ideology. All of these authors refer to literary works of art as eminent examples of the working of their conceptions of truth. In this way, these theories seem better able to explain the relationship between literature and truth than a propositional conception of truth.

However, despite all of these attempts to explain the cognitive value of literary works, some philosophers, such as Jerome Stolnitz and Peter Lamarque, remain skeptical about the importance of the novel’s cognitive value.⁶ These no-truth theorists claim that all of these different conceptions of cognition, knowledge or truth cannot ‘compete for the high-ground of truth to which human cognition aspires’.⁷ Furthermore, they doubt whether the fact that we might discover some truths in literary works, or learn something by reading them, means that truth must be considered a central literary value.

They think this kind of learning should be considered accidental, a possible side effect of reading, while the real value of literature lies in the aesthetic experience it evokes.

Reconsidering these main references in relation to the debate on the cognitive value of literary fiction, two main outcomes can be discerned. First, the debate has been primarily formulated in terms of truth or no-truth positions. Despite new versions of the propositional theory of literary truth recently being formulated by Kathleen Stock and Jukka Mikkonen, many alternative conceptions of truth have been used to explain the cognitive value of literature.⁸ Hence, the fact that different conceptions of truth are used in this debate may explain why there seems to be little progress in resolving it. Second, the debate has revealed the difficulty of articulating the cognitive value of literary fiction as related to the aesthetic experience. According to the no-truth position, the main feature of literary fiction is to invite the reader to an aesthetic experience – i.e. the appreciation of a literary text as a work of art – and precisely this aspect is neglected by the defenders of the cognitive value of literary fiction. The difference between truth and no-truth positions therefore seems to reflect a different appreciation of the aesthetic value of works of literary fiction.

We do not wish to argue that the different contributions to this special issue resolve the difficulty. Nevertheless, coming from different philosophical traditions, they go beyond the conceptual framework of the debate between the truth and no-truth theories and intend to shed new light on the central question. One of the main perspectives presented in this issue concerns the question of whether it is necessary to understand the cognitive value of literature in terms of truth or knowledge. Furthermore, while the experience of reading literary fiction appears to be central to several contributions, the other main perspective taken in this issue concerns the question of whether and to what extent the cognitive value of literature can be understood as related to literature's aesthetic value. In this way, a number of contributions seem to challenge – either directly or indirectly – the claims of the no-truth theorists, while at the same time taking their critique of literary cognitivism seriously.

The interview with Peter Lamarque and Derek Attridge which opens this special issue, aims to summarise the stakes in the debate. To begin with, it should be noted that, although Attridge and Lamarque developed their theoretical work on literature starting from very different philosophical traditions, they often seem to share similar concerns and ideas. Furthermore, Attridge and Lamarque share an interest in the question of what it means to read a work of literature as a work of art, and, therefore, they both have an interest in the aesthetic experience of literary fiction. In the course of this interview, it becomes clear that, although Attridge and Lamarque both object in some way to instrumental approaches to literature, they both insist on the fact that reading literature in some way enriches our lives and thus has an important

extra-literary value. The question, however, remains as to what extent this value can be understood in terms of truth or knowledge.

In the first article of this special issue, ‘The Paradox of Fact from Fiction: What Fiction Can and Can’t Tell Us About the Real World’, Todd Jones argues that, although it is often assumed that reading fiction is an important way to gain knowledge about the world, it is far from clear how this is possible. Jones is thus concerned with what he calls ‘the paradox of fact from fiction’, namely the question of how an invented fictional world can give us knowledge about the real one. In order to answer this question, Jones focuses on two ways in which we can obtain justificatory evidence for the beliefs we acquire from fiction. The first way is by a ‘fiction suggests – real world attests’ process, in which a justification comes from the world external to the fiction. The second way is a ‘resemblance-shortcut’ process, in which justification is internal to the fiction, which means that we need to take additional steps to ensure that the fictional world sufficiently resembles our world. By exploring these two routes, Jones shows that, if we want to learn about the real world from fiction, it is not sufficient for fiction to give us interesting beliefs, and that extra work needs to be done if we want to know whether beliefs acquired through reading fiction are justified.

In the second article, ‘Literature as Experiment: The Ontological Commitment of Fiction’, Gert-Jan van der Heiden focuses on the idea that literature offers us new perspectives on the world and on ourselves, and raises the question of what the ontological commitment of literature is in its construction of another world. This question is addressed by discussing Paul Ricoeur’s conception of literature as a space in which experiments are conducted, with a critique of parts of this understanding inspired by the work of Giorgio Agamben. As Van der Heiden shows, both Ricoeur and Agamben state that literature creates fundamentally new forms of experience that do not depend on the experiences offered by nature. This means that in literary experiments, truth and existence themselves are at stake. That there are, nevertheless, differences between Ricoeur’s and Agamben’s views becomes clear in Van der Heiden’s discussion of Melville’s short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. According to Van der Heiden, this story shows us that the experiments conducted by literature concern a potentiality-of-being, which is hidden in the sheer positivity or actuality of what is – of the everyday world we inhabit. However, what Agamben is able to show and Ricoeur not, is the idea that in the character of Bartleby we encounter the potentiality not to act. In this way, Van der Heiden argues that the commitment of literary experiments is to offer an experience of being and acting differently, in which being is experienced as potentiality-of-being, or contingency, and in which acting is using one’s capacity not-to-act.

In ‘The Question of Literary Realism: Adorno and the Form of the Novel’, the third article in this issue, Mario Farina focuses on the form of the novel and its relationship to the problem of realism. By investigating the problem

of realism, Farina aims to provide a conception of the novel which is able to justify the fact that several narrative genres with different claims about reality are included in the same literary category by both critics and the public. Farina develops this account by building on Theodor W. Adorno's notion of 'literary realism'. In this way, Farina aims to show that realism cannot be seen as a normative stylistic stance which sometimes succeeds, sometimes fails. Rather, reality might be expressed realistically in many different ways depending on the historical and cultural context. In this way, realism can be understood as the literary capacity to express and reveal the deepest structure of reality, while it is also apparent that the means of expression have changed throughout history.

Mojca Küplen examines the effect of narrative works of art on self-understanding in her article, 'Narrative Simulation as a Route to Self-Knowledge and Self-Development'. Central to Küplen's argument is the idea that narrative works of art offer the reader/viewer the possibility to adopt a dual first and third-person perspective. Narrative simulations invite the reader/viewer to connect with fictional characters on a first-person level using the vantage point (s)he would have if (s)he were actually experiencing the events portrayed, while at the same time they do not directly reflect the reader's or viewer's ordinary experiences. Narratives are always the result of selection, which means that each work of narrative art brings with it a different interpretation and explanation of the issues and themes it portrays. Endorsing the emotional realism view, Küplen argues that because of this dual perspective, narrative works of art help the reader/viewer to make sense of their own internal experiences and to recognise the meaning of these experiences in the larger context of their life.

In the fifth article, 'The Truth of the Story and its Variations', Sanem Yazıcıoğlu changes perspective and asks the question of whether it is possible to tell one's true life story. Building on the work of Hannah Arendt, Yazıcıoğlu argues that one's life story presents two significant difficulties: nobody can be the author of their own life story because the events in one's life are unpredictable; and nobody has sufficient distance from their own life to guarantee that the true story is told. By focusing on these two problems, Yazıcıoğlu emphasises the importance of the plurality of perspectives and argues that fiction is an inseparable component of all narratives of reality.

In her article, 'Is Literary Fiction about Truth or Meaning?', Leen Verheyen also builds on the work of Hannah Arendt and, in particular, on Arendt's distinction between truth and meaning. Starting from this distinction, Verheyen argues that it is a mistake to understand the cognitive value of literature in terms of truth or knowledge. Verheyen develops an alternative account of the cognitive value of literature, which is based on the idea that literary fiction 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, Verheyen focuses on

the way in which the literary work of fiction suspends direct reference to the real world, and the invitation this suspension offers to the reader to interpret the story. According to Verheyen, it is this process of interpretation that affects the readers' frame of reference and their way of understanding the world.

In the final article, 'Reading for Opacity and the Cognitive Value of Literary Fiction', Arthur Cools takes Peter Lamarque's notion of opacity as a starting point in order to reconsider the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction. Following the attention given to the reader's experience of literary fiction, as implied by this notion, he argues that the cognitive value of literary fiction is intrinsic to the reader's experience and that the clarification of this connection requires that the reader's interest in reading literary fiction be taken into account. He analyses the reader's experience of literary fiction in terms of them having an interest at a distance, and articulates the cognitive aspects of this experience on the basis of an argument that he borrows from Roman Ingarden's reflections on the literary artwork. According to this argument, 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.

As is apparent from this short description of the different contributions to this issue, the debate about the cognitive value of literary fiction is far from resolved. The question can be approached from many original and interesting perspectives, and bringing these perspectives together here, and thereby revealing the variety of approaches, certainly constitutes one of the main aims of this issue. Nevertheless, while these approaches may be new and original, the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction requires that we address and re-examine basic notions such as fiction, narrative, literary work, imagination, meaning, reference, truth and cognition. In this regard, two main tendencies in the debate can be indicated.

Generally, in the examination of the question at stake, the experience of reading literary fiction has received more attention, whether it is in terms of experiment or in terms of the reader's emotional or thoughtful response to the fictional character or world. At the same time, and probably because of this attention given to the reader's experience of literary fiction, it is no longer taken for granted that the notions of truth and knowledge are the privileged way to address the question of the cognitive value of literary fiction, especially if defined in terms of justifiable beliefs about the real world, or in terms of an accordance with the reader's experience of the real world. This is also clear from the emergence of neo-cognitivist approaches to literary fiction, which emphasise the idea that there are 'many forms of cognition that cannot be explained in the standard philosophical vocabulary of knowledge acquisition, many ways of coming to grasp the world that do not rely on my having come into possession of a new worldly truth'.⁹ This does not mean that the notions of truth, knowledge or justified belief as such are disappearing from

the discussion, or that there is no cognitive value to literary fiction. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case, and literary fiction might even be seen as an experiment which challenges our common conceptions of truth, knowledge and justified beliefs.

arthur.cools@uantwerpen.be
leen.verheyen@uantwerpen.be

NOTES

1. Weitz 1955 and Hospers 1960.
2. Shakespeare 1980, p. 185.
3. Walsh 1969.
4. Nussbaum 2010, p. 107.
5. Wilson 1983.
6. Stolnitz 1992 and Lamarque and Olsen 1994.
7. Lamarque 2014, p. 127.
8. Stock 2016 and Mikkonen 2013.
9. Gibson 2008, p. 585.

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