

Article

The Problem of Literary Truth in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*

Paolo Pitari ^{1,2}

¹ Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, University Ca' Foscari, 30123 Venice, Italy; paolo.pitari@unive.it

² Department of English and American Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, D-80799 Munich, Germany

Abstract: In contemporary literary theory, Plato is often cited as the original repudiator of literary truth, and Aristotle as he who set down that literature is “imitation,” thus himself involuntarily banning literature from truth. This essay argues that these interpretations adulterate the original arguments of Plato and Aristotle, who both believed in literary truth. We—literary theorists and philosophers of literature—should recognize this and rethink our interpretation of these ancient texts. This will, in turn, lead us to ask better questions about the nature of literary truth and value.

Keywords: literary theory; philosophy of literature; literary value; mimesis; interpretation; hermeneutics



Citation: Pitari, Paolo. 2021. The Problem of Literary Truth in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. *Literature* 1: 14–23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature1010003>

Academic Editor: Nicholas Birns

Received: 9 April 2021

Accepted: 23 July 2021

Published: 5 August 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Premise

Today's commonsense affirms that truth and value belong to the sciences, and that literature has little to offer in these regards. Even many of those who dedicate their lives to literary studies appear to have given up on defending outmoded notions of literary truth and value. The sciences are truly necessary to humankind. Literature, on the other hand, is a pastime that may entertain some people, but it is certainly something we *could* do without.

Literary studies have thus become ever harder to justify. Funding, applications, and departments constantly decrease. This shows that we are learning to live on earthly bread alone, and that we no longer believe that heavenly bread is necessary. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky 2004), even the Grand Inquisitor and Christ agreed on the necessity of heavenly bread. Today, we do not. Dostoevsky would regard us as less spiritual than the Grand Inquisitor. He would say that our time resembles the “indifference” that Reverend Tikhon denounces in *Demons* (Dostoevsky 2006) rather than the “total atheism” of his nihilists, which “is more respectable than worldly indifference, [because] a complete atheist stands on the next-to-last upper step to the most complete faith (he may or may not take that step), while the indifferent one has no faith, apart from a bad fear” (Dostoevsky 2006, p. 426).

Spirituality need not be religious. For millennia, human beings have felt that literature provided a relationship with the truth.¹ Today, rationality has progressed to argue that such a claim is unreasonable: literature is either false or just a practice that has no relationship with the truth at all. Even most literary theorists and philosophers of literature make this argument. Reading Lamarque and Olsen's *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Lamarque and Olsen 2002) and Lamarque's *Philosophy of Literature* (2008)—two extensive accounts of the history of the field—, for example, demonstrates this. The sense of impending doom in literary studies is thus justified. It originates in judgments like Russell's in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1950)—“the propositions in [*Hamlet*] are false because there was no such man” (Russell 1995, p. 294)—and Goodman's in *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984)—“all fiction is literal, literary falsehood” (Goodman 1984, p. 124).

Accordingly, in *Language, Truth, and Literature* (Gaskin 2016), Gaskin writes that, today, literary truth and literary value are under attack from both analytic philosophers and

deconstructionists. In *What Is Fiction For?* (Harrison 2015), Harrison argues that they are under attack from both affirmers and deniers of the correspondence theory of truth.² All sides seem to agree that literature is removed from the truth. Leon put it succinctly in his “Literary Truth and Realism” (1921): in literature, “as no verification is then possible either by evidence or deduction from universal principles, the question of truth, reality, probability and possibility is really finished with” (Leon 1921, p. 292). On these grounds, literature “has long since been condemned [. . .] on the score of truth” (ibid.).

Within this general interpretative framework, in literary theory and philosophy of literature, Plato is often cited as the original repudiator of literary truth, and Aristotle as he who set down that literature is “imitation,” from which follows that literature cannot be “true” because—as Lamarque and Olsen insist—the imitation of the truth is always something less than the actual truth.

Yet, this essay argues that these kinds of interpretations misrepresent the original texts of Plato and Aristotle. What follows defends this proposition and argues that it is valuable for two reasons: one, because it reminds us that we often misunderstand the ancients and that they still have something to teach us; two, because it sheds light on various difficulties in today’s exploration of the possibility of literary truth. Accordingly, the analysis aims to show that *it is not true* that Plato and Aristotle deny literary truth and, on the contrary, that re-reading them forces us to doubt today’s predominant skepticism in literary studies.

2. Plato’s Unfinished Business

It is often said that Plato condemns poetry as falsehood, deploring its practice and its practitioners, and that he wants poetry banned from the republic because it is false. In *Between Ecstasy and Truth* (2011), Stephen Halliwell confirms that this is today’s common reading of Plato, but he also suggests that this interpretation is mistaken:

Far from amounting to the monolithic, unwaveringly hostile doctrine which so many modern scholars have constructed from them, Plato’s many dealings with poetry constitute complex transactions of philosophically unfinished business. While the dialogues often expose poetry (and its advocates) to probing challenges, they never try to push poetry permanently aside or to claim that philosophy (in the form of Plato’s own writing) can ever afford to stop engaging with it. (Halliwell 2011, pp. 179–80)

Halliwell adds that there is no proof of “what modern scholarly orthodoxy takes to be the ultimate, definitive statement of Platonic renunciation of poetry” (ibid., p. 180). If he is right, the common interpretation of Plato’s view on poetry as constituting a monolithic, hostile doctrine is unjustified. This section of the essay follows this path and intends to show why the *Republic* cannot be read as a condemnation of poetry *per se*. Specifically, it aims to argue that, while Book X of the *Republic* is indeed the text where Plato formulates his most radical attack on poetry and on art’s lack of truth, we nonetheless cannot ignore the problem of the metaphysical foundation of Book X nor the contents of Books II and III—which contradict Book X—if we want to attain a proper understanding of Plato’s remarks on poetic truth and value.

Book II discusses the proper education of children. Its discussion of fiction begins with this proposition: “we begin by telling children stories, which, taken as a whole, are fiction, though they contain some truth” (Plato 1997, 377a). The interpretation of Plato as a censor of poetry *per se* already begins to crumble, here, as Plato explicitly states that even fiction contains “some truth.” This means that narrative fiction is not necessarily false. On the contrary, it can contain truth. And on this premise Plato constructs his moral argument: we need “to supervise the making of fables and legends” (ibid., 377b–c) so as to allow only those fables and legends that tell the truth, because the truth is good.

Therefore, Book II sets down a moral criticism of some narrators: namely, of those who do not use their art to tell the truth. In this sense, Plato writes that “the worst of all faults” is when “the story is ugly and immoral as well as false—misrepresenting the nature of gods and heroes” (ibid., 377e). Again, this criticism entails that fiction can and must contain the truth: to be false and immoral can be “the worst of all faults” for a story only if the true nature of a good story is to be true and moral. Thus, Plato criticizes those who make up false and immoral stories because he believes that stories can and should be true and moral. To state it in contemporary terms: Plato believes both in literary truth—i.e., that fiction can contain truth—and in literary value as truth-value—i.e., that the value of a piece of literature depends, at least in large part, on whether its content is true.

Plato once again makes this explicit by writing that “a poet, whether he is writing epic, lyric, or drama, surely ought always to represent the divine nature as it really is” (ibid., 379a). This is a categorical statement: poetic value is truth-value, good poetry is the poetry that represents the truth. Book II, therefore, does not criticize poetry itself: it criticizes *some* poetry, i.e. *false* poetry. And its argument is not theoretical; it is educational, moral, it sets down that the poet has a duty to the truth. This is far from a renunciation or condemnation of poetry as false. It is the affirmation of Plato’s firm belief in the educational value of poetic truth: “we can make our fiction as good an embodiment of truth as possible” (ibid., 382d).

Book III reiterates this belief and insists on the moral duties that follow. We not only *can* make fiction the best possible embodiment of the truth, but we *must*: “a high value must be set upon truthfulness” (ibid., 389b). Plato’s concrete criticism of the writers of his time and place arises precisely because of this belief in the possibility of poetic truth. Hence he writes that

we shall find both poets and prose-writers guilty of the most serious misstatements about human life, making out that wrongdoers are often happy and just men miserable; that injustice pays, if not detected; and that my being just is to another man’s advantage, but a loss to myself. We shall have to prohibit such poems and tales and tell them to compose others in the contrary sense. (ibid., 392b)

Plato here is saying that we must prohibit poems and tales that do not respect narrative art’s duty to the truth. This is why his condemnation of some poems and tales ends with the invitation “to compose others in the contrary sense”: that is, to compose others that are true. Regardless of Plato’s definition of “truth” (that wrongdoers are unhappy, that injustice does not pay, etc., with which we may disagree), what interests us is that Plato here reiterates that narrative art can and must contain the truth. For him, not all poets must be exiled from the republic; only those who fail to respect the moral duty of narrative fiction—that “a high value must be set upon truthfulness”—must be exiled.

The injunctions of Books II and III are thus educational, moral, ethical, and political. Far from presenting a banishment of the written arts, they entail the explicit affirmation of these arts’ ability to contain, represent, convey, and embody truth, as well as the judgment that a major part of literary value is truth-value (for a story, the worst of all faults is to be false and immoral and ugly).

Literary theorists and philosophers of literature have commonly lost sight of the contents of Books II and III. Nonetheless, it is true that in Book X Plato seems to dismantle all hopes of artistic truth and value. But is there not an obvious contradiction between Books II and III and Book X? Or is there a way to reconcile Plato’s two opposite approaches and discourses? The contents of Book X are sustained by other arguments Plato makes elsewhere. In the *Apology of Socrates* (Plato 1924), Socrates approaches poets to see whether they can explain the meaning of their own creations. He finds that they cannot and concludes that they have no knowledge (*sophía*) but are instead inspired by some natural gift (*phýsei tini*) and compose in the grip of divine frenzy (*enthusiaszónτες*). This makes poets rather like fortune-tellers and prophets, which is why Socrates banishes them from the realm of truth. Similarly, in *Gorgias* (Plato 1925b), poetry is described as a kind of rhetoric, a sophism that does not justify its assertions and whose aim is not truth but

persuasion. The same occurs in *Phaedrus*, where Socrates indicts the rhapsodes because their speeches proceed “without questioning and explanation” and “are given only in order to produce conviction” (Plato 1999, 277e8–9). Finally, in *Ion* (Plato 1925a), Socrates exhibits the contradiction in Ion’s defense of true knowledge in Homer and, in so doing, condemns Homer to falsehood too.

But how can we make sense of the discrepancy between these arguments and those of Books II and III of the *Republic*? Book X states “that the artist knows nothing worth mentioning about the subjects he represents, and that art is a form of play, not to be taken seriously” (Plato 1997, 603a–b). This is a direct denial of artistic truth that, of course, includes the denial of narrative truth. Art cannot represent even the appearance of things; it only represents the appearance of the appearance of things. It is thrice removed from reality, pure falsehood. Worse, it is a lie because it purports to represent the truth. It is not only futile but deleterious.

This argument is metaphysical. For Plato, first of all, art is “at the third remove from reality” (ibid., 597e) because down here in the world where sensory experience reigns nothing is strictly speaking real. Only Ideas in the world of Ideas are real. Plato takes a bed as an example and writes that the only “real maker of” “the essential Bed,” the only “real Bed,” the “single ideal Bed” (ibid., 597c–d) is God. Every bed on earth is just a copy of the single ideal Bed. The carpenter produces imitations of the only real Bed, what the carpenter “makes is not the reality, but only something that resembles it” (ibid., 597a). In turn, the painter who paints a bed produces an imitation of an imitation of the only real Bed. This is why art is thrice removed from reality. And, Plato insists, the carpenter at least creates something of use, and “can we say the same of the painter? Certainly not. Then what is he, with reference to a bed? I think it would be fairest to describe him as the artist who represents the things which the other two make” (ibid., 597e).

In Book X, therefore, art appears as both useless and false because it is mere imitation of another unreal imitation. This argument is irreconcilable with the content of Books II and III. The contradiction is unsolvable. On the one hand, narrative art is presupposed to be capable of representing the truth. On the other hand, a metaphysical argument is presented for the impossibility of art’s relationship to the truth. The unresolved contradiction between these two positions constitutes what Halliwell aptly defines as Plato’s “wavering, unfinished business.” In theory, Plato condemns poetry as falsehood. In practice, he treats it as a bearer of truth and its value as truth-value.

In relation to this contradictory ambivalence, two further comments must be voiced. First, Plato’s denial of poetic truth rests entirely on his metaphysics, which means that, if one disproves the metaphysical foundations (i.e., that truth belongs to the world of Ideas), then Plato’s entire argument falls. Second, it seems non-coincidental, within the *Republic*, that the ethical argument comes first. That is, Book X may ultimately serve to insist upon the ethical condemnation of certain narrative works—the false ones—which Plato deeply cares to ban from the republic.

Halliwell, Massimo Cacciari and Alexander Nehamas make this argument. For example, in “Plato and the Mass Media” (1988), Nehamas writes that “Plato’s attack on epic and tragic poetry” is a matter of “moral disapproval” (Nehamas 1988, p. 222). In light of the present analysis, this interpretation appears both correct and valuable. Both because Plato’s denial of artistic truth rests on his long-disproven metaphysics and because, ultimately, the moral argument is preeminent in Plato’s texts.³

Thus, to cite Plato today as the first denier of literary truth appears either careless or outright wrong. In fact, Plato’s remarks on poetry may be taken to reveal how even this theoretician of artistic falsehood couldn’t help but treat art, in practice, as the bearer of truth. In addition, Plato’s denial of artistic truth also rests on the presupposition that art is *mimesis* and is therefore no useful creation like that of the carpenter. And yet one should ask: if the carpenter’s bed is both an imitation of the Idea and the creation of something new, then why couldn’t the painter’s painting be both an imitation of the bed and the creation of a painting? If there is a sense in which the carpenter creates a bed, then why

is there not a sense in which the painter creates a painting? Plato's condemnation of art as *mimesis* appears inconsistent. There seems to be no reason why the painter should be denied the creative aspect that is granted to the carpenter.

The problem of *mimesis* is central to the question of artistic truth, and it remains a problem to this day. Why do we still assume an irreconcilable opposition between imitation and creation? Can't something be both representative and creative? What is mimetic in abstract painting? But is there truth in abstract painting? In "What Is Literature?" (1947), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "the painter does not want to draw signs on his canvas, he wants to create a thing. And if he puts together red, yellow, and green, there is no reason why this collection of colours should have a definable significance, that is, should refer particularly to another object" (Sartre 1988, p. 26). In short, for Sartre: the painter does not refer, he *creates*; and Sartre then explains that "I say 'create,' not 'imitate'" (ibid., p. 333) precisely to underline that art is not *mimesis* but creation of something new. After him, contemporary writer David Foster Wallace, in "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), summarized the latest developments in contemporary literary theory and philosophy of literature as follows: "if *mimesis* isn't dead, then it's on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be" (Wallace 2012a, p. 64).⁴

The idea of art as imitation appears untenable today. Yet, just as the idea of art as imitation seems untenable so does the idea of art as pure creation. Both perspectives actually seem to lead to the same outcome: the affirmation of art's irremediable separation from the truth and the world. This is why the notion of artistic knowledge appears so hard to justify. But what if the solution to this problem was to see that the relationship between artistic creation and artistic imitation is not actually one of opposition? What if creation and imitation actually coexist in art? What if we should adjust our understanding of the meaning of these terms accordingly? A look at Aristotle's *Poetics* will help us in this reflection. This work has always been interpreted as the origin of the idea of *mimesis* as imitation, but this too is a misinterpretation.

3. Aristotelian Mimesis Is Not Imitation

Aristotle contradicts the teachings of his mentor, Plato. The *Poetics* explicitly states that the written arts convey the truth and that this is their high value—and *mimesis* is central to this argument. In *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (2002), Stephen Halliwell writes that "the understanding of Aristotelian *mimesis* has suffered almost as much at the hands of its ostensible friends as at those of its avowed opponents" (Halliwell 2002, p. 151). He also insists on "the inadequacy of the still prevalent translation of *mimesis* as 'imitation'" (ibid., p. 152).

This section of the essay again follows the path indicated by Halliwell: the notion of *mimesis* as imitation is inadequate and moves us to misunderstand the nature of art and therefore the possibility of artistic truth. Halliwell's reminder that "Aristotelian *mimesis* has suffered as much from its friends" is particularly precious here because to intend *mimesis* as imitation *and* to try to defend *mimesis* as truth is to inevitably force aesthetic discourse into the unavoidable denial of artistic truth. This is because—as Lamarque and Olsen effectively argued—imitative truth can never stand on the same level as actual truth.

In short, it is impossible to defend artistic truth if the starting principle is that art is *mimesis* and that *mimesis* is imitation. This is why a rethinking of Aristotelian *mimesis* can be so valuable today: it can help us question the starting principle that has forced so many theories of literature to conclude that literary truth is impossible.

The *Poetics* states that *poiêsis* is a *téchne* founded upon *mimesis*, and that, precisely because *poiêsis* is founded upon *mimesis*, *poiêsis* is of great necessity and pleasure to humanity. This causal nexus established by Aristotle is surprising, and it also discloses the core of his reasoning: narrative art (poetry, epic, tragedy, and comedy) is valuable *because* it is *mimesis*; that is, narrative art is valuable because *mimesis* is necessary and pleasurable. But what does this mean?

Aristotle writes that “speaking generally, poetry seems to owe its origin to two particular causes, both natural. From childhood men have an instinct for representation and, in this respect, they differ from the other animals in that they are far more imitative and learn their first lessons by representing things. And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations” (Aristotle 1932, 1448b). In other words, for Aristotle, *mimesis* belongs to the core of human nature. It is not just enjoyment; it is how we learn. This is the meaning of *mimesis*. Most commonly translated as “imitation” and in the above passage as “representation,” Aristotelian *mimesis* is actually one of the natural ways in which human beings acquire knowledge.

Aristotle’s definitions of tragedy and *kátharsis* depend on this meaning of *mimesis* too. Aristotle writes that: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude—by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief [*kátharsis*] to these and similar emotions” (ibid., 1449b). Tragedy is a mode of “representation” (*mimesis*) and, through its mimetic capacity, it gains the power to bring forth *kátharsis* (relief).

But why does *mimesis* bring forth relief? *Mimesis* effects relief because it is a mode of knowledge acquisition, and because acquiring knowledge provides relief. This idea is one of the central foundations of Aristotelian philosophy and of the history of philosophy in general. When, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes that “it was because of wonder that men both now and originally began to philosophize” (Aristotle 1998, 982b), the word that he uses—which we commonly translate as “wonder”—is *thaûma*, and “wonder” is a mistranslation of *thaûma*. *Thaûma* means much more than “wonder.” The original meaning of *thaûma* is “terror.” “Wonder” is only the secondary meaning of the term, and even that “wonder” to which *thaûma* refers is the wonder generated by terror (e.g., the feeling of the first human being who experiences lightning and thunder). For example, in the *Odyssey*, Polyphemus—the monstrous giant, the most horrible, cruel, and merciless of the Cyclopes—incites *tháuma* (Homer 1945, IX, 190). Likewise, in Greek mythology, *Thaumas* is the god of the sea, the giant who decides the fate of sailors and who therefore is terrifying.⁵

Aristotle knows that to philosophize is to seek to understand the causal relationships in the world: we want to understand causality because said knowledge turns the unpredictable chaos of becoming into predictable order and so protects us from the terror of the unknown. In the same fashion, *mimesis* effects *kátharsis* because it allows us to learn and so to feel as though we can predict and control—through knowledge—the suffering to come. Thus, when Aristotle says that *mimesis* effects *kátharsis*, he is re-stating the same essential principle of philosophy: like philosophy, narrative art provides knowledge and therefore relief and, in this sense, there is unity of poetry and philosophy. *Mimesis* yields knowledge, and we all experience *kátharsis* in tragedy because “learning things gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but also in the same way to all other men” (Aristotle 1932, 1448b).

Therefore, *mimesis* is much more than imitation: it is the yielding of knowledge. Halliwell is thus right to denounce the common translation and interpretation of Aristotelian *mimesis*. Aristotelian *mimesis* is the idea that, through narrative art, we learn the truth, and that this learning—gaining knowledge of the truth—is the main purpose and value of narrative art.⁶

This unity of poetry and philosophy is reiterated in another famous passage of the *Poetics*:

a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse—indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in metre or not. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.

By a “general truth” I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily. [. . .] A “particular fact” is what Alcibiades did or what was done to him. (Aristotle 1987, 1451a–b)

Poetic *mimesis* can provide general truth, just like philosophy, and this truth is superior to that which history can provide. In fact, what Fyfe here translates as “general truth” is most often translated as “universal truth.” Like philosophy, poetic *mimesis* is concerned with knowledge of universal and eternal truths, knowledge of contingency and necessity. History, on the other hand, yields only particular truths, according to Aristotle.

Of course, today we know that history can do much more. But what we should learn from Aristotle is not the denial of the value of history, but the strong affirmation of the truth-value of narrative art. For Aristotle, poetic *mimesis* refers to probability and necessity, and probability and necessity are the two logical categories of Being, and so poetic *mimesis* refers to the most fundamental laws of reality. In addition, Aristotle writes that “under the head of Thought come all the effects to be produced by language” (ibid., 1456a). Therefore, Thought is produced by language, and poetry is the quintessential form of linguistic production (*poíesis*): that is, poetry plays an essential and irreplaceable role in the creation of Thought.

Aristotelian *mimesis*, thus, is far from mere imitation. *Mimesis* actually conveys universal truth and produces Thought. There is no *mimesis* without Truth, learning, and production of Thought, for Aristotle. This means that, just as Plato cannot be represented as one who clearly rejected all poetic truth, so Aristotle cannot be represented as he who established that poetry is imitation. In fact, the very opposite is true. Aristotle set down the principle that narrative art can convey universal truths through the particular (ibid., 1451b). In so doing, he set down the principle that moves the greatest writers of the history of Western civilization, the principle that both Samuel Johnson—in *Rasselas* (1759): “the business of a poet [. . .] is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances” (Johnson 1990, p. 43)—and William Wordsworth—in “1802 Preface to Lyrical Ballads”: “[poetry’s] object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative” (Wordsworth 1994, p. 258)—would make their own, and which James Joyce would adapt into the famous dictum “in the particular is contained the universal” (Ellmann 1982, p. 505).⁷ And despite the fact that literary theory and philosophy of literature today tend to go in the opposite direction, literary writers keep writing with this principle in mind. The ideal of Aristotelian *mimesis* still drives the history of Western literature.

When Shakespeare wrote, in *As You Like It* (1603), that “All the world’s a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players” (Shakespeare 2000, p. 125), he composed propositions that the reader should consider for their truth-value too. Philip Larkin did the same in “Dockery and Son” (1963): “Life is first boredom, then fear./ Whether or not we use it, it goes,/ And leaves what something hidden from us chose,/ And age, and then the only end of age” (Larkin 1988, p. 153). The Aristotelian ideal of literary truth survives even in Marxist theories of literature. György Lukács’s argument in “Realism in the Balance” (1938) that literary writers “discover the underlying essence, i.e., the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them” (Lukács 1980, p. 37) resonates with the Aristotelian ideal of literary truth. And so do Existentialist texts like Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970): “what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy [. . .] is something about the real quality of human nature. [. . .] The greatest art [. . .] shows us the world [. . .] with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all” (Murdoch 1970, p. 65).

4. Conclusions

Perhaps, knowledge is not merely a finite set of factual entities. Perhaps, it entails *awareness* of oneself and the reality one lives in. Perhaps, literature plays an indispensable role in relation to this awareness. And perhaps, in confronting literary works, the reader develops critical abilities that enable her to better discern the outstanding difficulty of

determining what is true. In “Literature, Science, and Reflection” (1978), Hilary Putnam indicated this dimension when he wrote that, in literature, “I do not learn” facts: “what I learn is to see the world as it looks to someone who is sure that hypothesis is correct” (Putnam 1978, p. 89).

From this perspective, literature is a training in becoming-aware of the truth. Plato and Aristotle saw immense value in the critical attitude that literature fosters. Has this value decreased today? Is our culture’s disinterest justified? In today’s information age, in which we are all bombarded by fallacious, harmful, and even dangerous assumptions regarding truth and knowledge, there’s an argument to be made in favor of literary value—in relation to truth, knowledge, and critical thinking—being as inestimable as it has ever been.

In recent years, David Foster Wallace’s commencement speech (2005)—posthumously entitled *This Is Water*—has achieved worldwide fame because of its invitation to “attention, and awareness, and discipline” (Wallace 2009, p. 120) in an era that makes it “unimaginably hard” (ibid., p. 135) to exercise these virtues. What the vast majority of people forget—in referring to this piece of non-fiction—is that Wallace considered *literary fiction* to be the privileged space wherein human beings can train the virtues that his commencement speech could only indicate. It is not a coincidence that his last posthumous novel, *The Pale King* (2011), was an effort to construct a prolonged exploration of what *This Is Water* could only point to. *The Pale King* represents characters, like Claude Sylvanshine, who come to understand that “it was true: the entire ball game [. . .] was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not” (Wallace 2012b, p. 14); who confront how, in order to be free, one must “pay close attention to his surroundings” (ibid., p. 23) and “be disciplined about it” (ibid., p. 345). There is no question that this novel invites the reader to reflect on whether these ideas are true, and on whether they apply to actual, lived life. Thus, *The Pale King* embodies the ideal of Aristotelian *mimesis*.

To conclude, then, understanding that Plato and Aristotle were not repudiators of literary truth can move us—literary theorists and philosophers of literature—to recognize that we need to re-think our interpretation of these ancient philosophers. This, in turn, can lead us to reconsider our approach to the fundamental problems of literary truth and value. Today, we struggle to defend these now seemingly outmoded notions of literary truth and value, and the misinterpretation of Plato and Aristotle arises within, and as a result of, this intellectual context. Yet, as we have seen, even Plato—who famously insisted on the “long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (Plato 1997, 607b5–6)—could not help but treat poetry, in practice, as the bearer of truth. This is why he focused so intently on condemning false poems and tales and promoting true ones.

Plato and Aristotle remind us that the greatest thinkers in Western history have always treated literary production as a bearer of the truth. Plato wavered between repudiating and affirming literary truth *in theory* but, *in practice*, he treated literature as an index of truth. Aristotle, instead, by theorizing *mimesis*, moved one step further and *unambiguously* positioned literature as a reflection of the truth. In misinterpreting them, we risk losing their most important teachings. This essay does not provide any answers, but it can perhaps help us ask better questions. Today, philosophers like Richard Rorty, Peter Lamarque, and Stein Haugom Olsen propose a defense of literary value without truth. But can a concept be valuable without being true? What does it mean to assert that something is useful if one cannot assert that that something is *truly* useful? Is it so obvious that the sciences are the only subjects that have a right to the truth? These and similar questions still stand before us unanswered, and to recognize that they do is to take a necessary first step towards opening the possibility of answering them. In pursuing this quest, we must not take certain views for granted. If we do that, we will not find true answers, and we will also misinterpret some of the most important texts of our past.

Funding: This research was funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the JFK Institute of Freie Universitaet Berlin.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Some argue that “literature” in its contemporary meaning emerged during the Romantic period (e.g., Ross in “The Emergence of Literature” and Eagleton in *Literary Theory*). Yet, here I use the term in its most general and all-inclusive meaning, encompassing even the most ancient written works. After all, “literature” derives from the Latin root *litteratura* and, as Peter Lamarque writes in *The Philosophy of Literature* (Lamarque 2008), philosophy of literature begins in Ancient Greece.
- ² Before them, in “The Truth Value of Literary Statements” (1972), Eaton wrote that not only the group comprising “B. Russell, Sellars, Quine, Ayer, and [. . .] G. E. Moore” (Eaton 1972, p. 163) denied literary truth but also that “such persons as Strawson, Hart, Ryle, Richards and Ingarden, believe, for various reasons, that sentences in literary works lack truth value” (ibid., p. 164).
- ³ In fact, Plato’s belief in the moral power of literature resonates to this day. Think of the anti-slavery influence of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe 1981), of *Black Beauty’s* (Sewell 2011) teachings in animal welfare, and of *Flight Behavior* (Kingsolver 2013)—an awareness-raising novel about climate change—for some examples of literature’s direct moral influence on the culture.
- ⁴ For an analysis of Sartre’s influence on Wallace see Pitari: “The Influence of Sartre’s ‘What Is Literature?’ on David Foster Wallace’s Literary Project” (Pitari 2020).
- ⁵ This idea of *thaûma* as the terror at the origin of philosophy is already present in Plato’s *Theaetetus*: “this feeling—a sense of *thaûma*—is perfectly proper to a philosopher: philosophy has no other foundation, in fact” (155d). The first affirmation of this idea can be found in the “Hymn to Zeus” of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus 1984). For further reflection on the double meaning of *thaûma* see John Llewelyn’s “On the Saying that Philosophy Begins in Thaumazein” (2001): “*thaumazein* is one of those wonderful words that face in opposite directions at one and the same time [and which] both opens our eyes wide and plunges us into the dark” (Llewelyn 2001, 1). Relatedly, see also Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (Otto 1936), where the holy is explained as both *tremendum* and *fascinans*.
- ⁶ David Hume’s “Of Tragedy” (1757) will later reiterate this Aristotelian point of view: “tragedy is imitation, and imitation is always of itself agreeable” (Hume 1993, p. 129); “it seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy” (ibid., p. 126). Again, here, “imitation” means much more than “a thing intended to simulate or copy something else” (OED – Hornby 2013).
- ⁷ (Also cited in Joyce 1966.) Non-coincidentally, James Joyce was an Aristotelian, as is brother Stanislaus wrote: “My brother’s interest in Pragmatism was slight, hardly more than a certain curiosity regarding a school of philosophy . . . which, he held, avoided philosophical difficulties by sidestepping nimbly. The asserted relativity of truth and the practical test of knowledge by its usefulness to an end ran counter not only to his Aristotelian principles of logic, but still more to his character” (Joyce 1959, p. 135).

References

- Aeschylus. 1984. *Agamemnon*. In *Aeschylus. The Oresteia: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Aristotle. 1932. *Poetics*. In *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Translated by William Hamilton Fyfe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, vol. 23.
- Aristotle. 1987. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: UNC Press.
- Aristotle. 1998. *Metaphysics*. Translated by Hughes Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2004. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage Books.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 2006. *Demons*. Translated by Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage.
- Eaton, Marcia. 1972. The Truth Value of Literary Statements. *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 12: 2. [CrossRef]
- Ellmann, Richard. 1982. *James Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gaskin, Richard. 2016. *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1984. *Of Mind and Other Matters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Halliwell, Stephen. 2002. *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Halliwell, Stephen. 2011. *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harrison, Bernard. 2015. *What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Homer. 1945. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Augustus Taber Murray. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hornby, Albert Sydney. 2013. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hume, David. 1993. Of Tragedy. In *David Hume: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Samuel. 1990. *Rasselas and Other Tales*. Edited by Gwin J. Kolb. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Joyce, James. 1959. *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*. New York: Viking Press.
- Joyce, James. 1966. *Letters of James Joyce*. Edited by R. Ellmann. London: Faber & Faber, vol. II.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. 2013. *Flight Behavior*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lamarque, Peter, and Stein Haugom Olsen. 2002. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lamarque, Peter. 2008. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Hoboken: Wiley.

- Larkin, Philip. 1988. Dockery and Son. In *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Leon, Philip. 1921. Literary Truth and Realism: The Aesthetic Function of Literature and Its Relation to Philosophy (I). *Mind New Series* 30: 287–302. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Llewelyn, John. 2001. On the Saying that Philosophy Begins in *Thaumazein*. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 4: 48–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Lukács, György. 1980. Realism in the Balance. In *Aesthetics and Politics*. Edited by Ernst Block, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Ronald Taylor. London: Verso.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1970. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge.
- Nehamas, Alexander. 1988. Plato and the Mass Media. *The Monist* 71: 214–34. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Otto, Rudolf. 1936. *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Pitari, Paolo. 2020. The Influence of Sartre’s ‘What Is Literature?’ on David Foster Wallace’s Literary Project. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61: 423–39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Plato. 1924. *Apology of Socrates*. In *Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, and Crito*. Edited by John Burnet. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Plato. 1925a. *Ion*. In *Statesman. Philebus. Ion*. Translated by Harold North Fowler, and Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Plato. 1925b. *Gorgias*. In *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*. Translated by Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Plato. 1997. *Republic*. In *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.
- Plato. 1999. *Phaedrus*. In *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1978. Literature, Science, and Reflection. In *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1995. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. London: Routledge.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1988. What Is Literature? In *“What Is Literature?” and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sewell, Anna. 2011. *Black Beauty*. London: Penguin.
- Shakespeare, William. 2000. *As You Like It*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. 1981. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly*. London: Penguin.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2009. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living A Compassionate Life*. New York: Little Brown.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2012a. Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young. In *Both Flesh and Not: Essays*. London: Penguin.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2012b. *The Pale King*. London: Penguin.
- Wordsworth, William. 1994. 1802 Preface to Lyrical Ballads. In *Romanticism*. Edited by Duncan Wu. Oxford: Blackwell.