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In Defense of Literary Truth: A Response to *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen to Inquire into No-Truth Theories of Literature, Pragmatism, and the Ontology of Fictional Objects

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Abstract: This article responds to the arguments put forth by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (1994). It argues that the said work is representative of the widespread tendency in literary theory today to discard the possibility of literary truth, and it provides counterarguments to the work's main theses. Consequently, it criticizes the philosophy of pragmatism and its implications, and it offers a theory that defines fictional objects as existing and solves contradictions that commonly affect our debates on the ontology of fiction. The article does not provide a positive theory of literary truth, but it undermines its denials, which have become popular in recent decades.

Keywords: Martha Nussbaum; Hilary Putnam; Richard Rorty; Bertrand Russell; Nelson Goodman; Alexius Meinong



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1. Introduction

Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective (1994) by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen exemplifies the widespread tendency in literary theory today to discard the possibility of literary truth. Thus, it presents an authoritative voice for the logic of our time, whereby science holds a monopoly over truth, and, therefore, confronting it proves a profitable means of discussing widespread views in literary theory today, and it allows us to tackle the problem of literary truth directly.¹

Lamarque and Olsen focus on “how works of literature relate to works with paradigmatically truth-seeking aims” (2002, p. 2), and they construct “a ‘no-truth’ theory of literature” to “argue... that the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice” (ibid., p. 1). While they concede that “the rejection of truth as an essential facet of literature is hardly original” (ibid.), they dismiss all past no-truth theories of literature as “radically misconceived” (ibid., p. 2), and they aim to offer a no-truth theory that nonetheless presents “a vigorous defense of the humanistic conception” (ibid.).

This is the intended originality of their work: the rejection of all previous theories of literature and the offer of an original no-truth theory that still supports literary value.² Their theory is intended to overcome the dichotomy between pro-truth theorists arguing for literary value and no-truth theorists arguing against it—a dichotomy that pervades the history of literary theory and is founded on the belief in the necessity of literary truth for literary value. Lamarque and Olsen aim to transcend this framework and dissolve this ancient chasm. Yet, their theory raises at least three broad levels of concern. First, whether literary value can stand regardless of literary truth. Second, whether the correct theory of literature is pro-truth or no-truth, which depends first of all on the *meaning* of “truth”. And

third, whether and how matters of literary theory, literary truth, and the philosophy of literature are merged or otherwise.

What follows explores issues in these three dimensions to seek insights into literary truth and value, and it concludes that literary value remains unthinkable without the notion of literary truth to support it (See also [Pitari 2021b](#)). No definitions of literary truth and value are attempted in this article because its goal is not to present a theory of literature (albeit an indication for one is offered in the last section, “On the Ontology of Fiction”) but to show that the notion of literary truth remains necessary and that it is thus still worth pursuing a theory capable of explaining it and justifying it. An indication of the notion of literary truth that this article seeks to defend, though, is that which is necessary to explain literature’s relationship to the world and its ability to describe reality. As a simple example, consider a literary work that represents a character whose solitude leads them to depression or any other mental state. The value of said representation must necessarily relate to its insight regarding the dynamics of those feelings and circumstances *in real human life*. If in reading such a representation, a reader cannot grasp or create *any* thoughts that relate to real and true conditions of life, then it is impossible to see what that reader could find interesting and valuable in that representation. This is the sense in which the article argues that literary truth is necessary for literary value. Its thesis thus provides counterarguments against all those contemporary theories that claim that literary fiction is not connected to “the real world” (itself a problematic term).

2. On the Rejection of Pro-Truth Theories of Literature

2.1. *The Theory of Novelistic Truth*

Lamarque and Olsen define the Theory of Novelistic Truth as the traditional pro-truth theory of literature. This theory comprises all arguments that establish that “the *mimetic* value of a literary work consists in the most general terms in its having a humanly interesting content” (2002, p. 289). In short, the theory postulates that literature is valuable because its content is true and profound.

Lamarque and Olsen acknowledge that “since the very beginning of the novel, novelists have been concerned that their stories should be read with the same seriousness as history because their novels were as instructive as history” (ibid.).³ They thus concede that to reject this theory is to reject what writers have traditionally said about their own work and that the theory gives an intuitively acceptable explanation of literary value (human beings are interested in valuable truths and keep reading because literature offers these). Yet, they affirm that the theory must in the end be rejected because its postulates deny the essential distinction between literature and real truth-seeking practices such as psychology, history, and the natural sciences—a distinction that explains why pro-truth theorists always end up defending notions of literary truth that are something less than actual truth. For this reason, the value of a literary work cannot be assessed based on its “truth-telling or ‘faithfulness’ to the facts” (ibid., p. 311), and therefore literary value “is better accounted for in non-referential terms” (ibid., p. 315).

This criticism is valid if literary truth is conceived of in terms of mimetic truth.⁴ But theorizing literary truth as “‘faithfulness’ to the facts” is reductive (not to mention that what constitutes “‘faithfulness’ to the facts” remains a profoundly mysterious matter; perhaps, the greatest achievement of logical positivism was to remind us precisely of this fact⁵). Therefore, their statement that literary truth is indefensible because literature is not faithful to the facts remains inscribed within a reductive logic of literary truth as mimetic truth, in a questionable theory of mimesis, and ultimately in a questionable worldview.

If literary mimesis is imitation or verisimilitude, then literary truth is always something less than actual truth. There is no denying that. The imitation of the truth cannot be the truth. But is literary truth really a matter of mimesis? When Lamarque and Olsen map literary history, they think of it as a history of mimesis, and this is why their mapping is erroneous. The story they tell is the common one of literary realism aspiring to represent the truth and of subsequent literary forms (modernism, postmodernism, etc.) abandoning this

ideal when they became aware of its impossibility. According to them, this shift occurred because of the rise of the social sciences: “realism declined *because* it became obvious that the social sciences performed so much better descriptive and explanatory tasks which the realist authors tended to see themselves as performing” (2002, p. 318).

Yet, while it is true that the development of literary forms is inextricably tied to the development of civilization and that the rise of scientific thinking influenced the course of literary history, literary writers nonetheless never abandoned the ideal of truth-telling. Modernists and postmodernists did not abandon the truth; they adopted new forms to embody new truths. The disagreement between realism, modernism, and postmodernism is not about truth-telling: it is about the nature of the truth. In fact, literary history follows the evolution of our civilization’s understanding of the truth and, in this sense, literature always remains realist: even when it rebels against traditional literary realism, it still aims to embody the truth.

Accordingly, Virginia Woolf represented the suffering of chaos and the impossibility of attaining the “complete whole” she dreamt of in *A Writer’s Diary* (Woolf 1982, p. 238) in works such as *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf [1925] 2000a) and *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf [1927] 2000b). She did this to express the true modernist experience, which was the loss of objective truth. She confirmed this “realist” principle in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (Woolf [1924] 1966), writing that *because* “on or around December 1910, human character changed” (320), *then* literary form, too, had to change. And again in “Modern Novels” (Woolf [1919] 1988), where she argued that modernism “brings us closer to what we were prepared to call life itself” (34).

Likewise, writers as diverse as Tolstoy (often considered a “realist”) and Proust sought to embody this same hopeless search for truth in chaos in novels such as *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy [1877] 2001) and *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Weitz [1913–1927] 1963a). Tolstoy attempted to revive the ideal that “one must live for truth, for God” (Tolstoy [1877] 2001, p. 799), but his novel remained “death-infected” (Pevear 1995, viii), i.e., pervaded by “the triumph of death on earth” (Shestov 1969, ch. 9). Levin, the novel’s hero, hopes to experience eternity but ultimately finds no escape from the recognition that “I, too, will be buried and nothing will be left. What for?” (Tolstoy [1877] 2001, p. 788)⁶. Similarly, Proust hoped to reveal through art the joy of Being that stands eternal outside time. He wanted to create art capable of looking at things and “extract[ing] their essence and... withdraw[ing] them from the contingencies of time” (Proust 1941, vol. XII, p. 239). He wanted to save things from death. He wanted to establish the *páthei máthos* that our culture inherited from Aeschylus⁷: “it is only while we are suffering that our thoughts... cause the depths within us to surge... to a height where we see that they are subject to laws which, until then, we could not observe” (ibid., vol. XII, p. 248); “one might almost say that works of literature are like artesian wells, the deeper the suffering, the higher they rise” (ibid., vol. XII, p. 262). As M. Weitz wrote, in this novel, “Proust does not merely dramatize a theory about reality; he states it” (1963a, p. 79). Woolf and Tolstoy, instead, dramatized their theories of reality in their fiction *and stated them* in their non-fiction. The essence, though, remains the same. These canonical authors embody the underlying principle of literary history: even when the ideal of objective representation is abandoned, that is because objectivity comes to be seen as a false ideal and because the goal remains to embody the truth, whatever its character may be.

2.2. Metaphorical Truth

Metaphorical truth is itself something less than the actual truth. According to the reasoning seen above, Lamarque and Olsen coherently deny all defenses of literary truth as metaphorical truth. They grant that conveying “a determinate propositional content” (2002, p. 363) that expresses truth may be a “context-specific aim of a metaphor” (ibid.), but they submit that this is not the “constitutive aim of speaking metaphorically” (ibid.) and that this “inevitably distances metaphor from truth-telling” (ibid.) and makes any metaphorical, context-specific truth “likely to be a low-key truth” (ibid.). They state that

the essence of a metaphor is in its “special cognitive powers” (ibid.); a metaphor “involves a process of thought not a grasp of content” (ibid.), and this distinguishes it fundamentally from a proper truth-telling expression.

But why should a metaphorical truth be context-specific? It seems quite possible for a metaphor to express general truths. In addition, why should context specificity distance a notion from the truth? Again, it seems quite easy to conceptualize context-specific truths. In fact, is the context specificity of truth not exactly the idea upon which all scientific specialization is founded? Scientific fields are based on the idea that truths are context-specific, and scientific truths are exactly the kind of truths Lamarque and Olsen defend. And yet they say that the context specificity of metaphor makes metaphorical truth likely to be a low-key truth. This is a contradiction.

Finally, even granting that the special cognitive powers of metaphor lie not in truth-expression but in the fostering of thought, it remains unclear why this should undermine the notion of metaphorical truth. Lamarque and Olsen even affirm that “truth (or falsity) is not part of the definition of either fiction, literature, or metaphor. Yet truth (or falsity) can arise in connection with all three, in unproblematic ways. The *sentences* used in fictive utterances and which appear in literary works, like those in metaphorical utterances, can have truth-values” (ibid., p. 366). With this affirmation, they admit that a practice need not have truth as its ultimate aim to be able to express it.

None of this is to say that metaphorical truth correctly expresses the nature of literary value. It is only to show that the criticism Lamarque and Olsen present is unable to undermine it.

2.3. The Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value

Under this heading, Lamarque and Olsen group all theories that make “the *subjective experience* central” to the notion of literary truth and present “a traditional humanistic view of literature as an instrument for training and extending our sympathetic understanding of other people” (2002, pp. 370–71). The basis of these theories is the idea that literature provides knowledge of “what it is like.” This was perhaps most famously voiced by Dorothy Walsh in *Literature and Knowledge*: literature provides “knowing in the sense of realizing by living through” (Walsh 1969, p. 104) and “*realizing* what this might be like as a lived experience” (ibid., p. 101).

Lamarque and Olsen define this theory as proposing that literature provides not knowledge of facts but of how facts relate to subjective experience, and they concede that the theory, in this sense, “provides a strong justification for the claim that subjective experience represents knowledge” (2002, p. 380). They concede too that the theory “makes the relationship between the literary work and the imaginative participation in the subjective experience a logical one and thus ensures that the knowledge yielded by a literary work is specific to it as literature” (ibid.). Yet, they argue that it, too, fails to present a viable defense of literary truth and, in this case, their criticism rests on a separation of “truth” and “authenticity”: literature, they say, can provide an authentic experience of “what it is like”, but this does not amount to knowledge of the truth.

However, separating authenticity from truth constitutes a contradiction, again. The concept of authenticity cannot be separated from the truth. One cannot tell what is authentic or inauthentic if one does not know the truth. Authentic gold is true gold, and likewise, when we talk about authenticity in literature (in the sense described above), we are talking about a literary work veritably accompanying the reader through a possible lived experience, while the inauthentic work fails to do so. Lamarque and Olsen’s rejection of the Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value depends on a logically impossible separation of authenticity from truth. And because this separation is impossible, when they grant that literary works can be authentic, Lamarque and Olsen effectively grant that they can be true.

2.4. Literature as Moral Philosophy

Philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam developed a view of literature as moral philosophy.⁸ In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum wrote that the works of Henry James, for example, are “moral achievements on behalf of our community” (Nussbaum 1990, p. 165) and “candidates for moral truth which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which *The Golden Bowl* expresses wonderfully” (ibid., p. 142). Likewise, Hilary Putnam said, in “Literature, Science, and Reflection” (Putnam 1976) that: “I want to suggest that if moral reasoning, at the reflective level, is the conscious criticism of ways of life, then the sensitive appreciation in the imagination of predicaments and perplexities must be essential to sensitive moral reasoning. Novels and plays do not set moral knowledge before us, that is true. But they do (frequently) something for us that must be done for us if we are to gain any moral knowledge” (p. 486).

In opposition, Lamarque and Olsen counterargue that these theories treat literature as if its aim were to morally educate readers, and as if literary value were determined by whether a work can improve the moral status of its readers. This criticism is again reasonable: the idea that literature should morally educate people is both naïve and indefensible.⁹ Literature has no moral pedestal to stand upon and, in this sense, nothing to teach.

Yet, what literature can do is provide a space for conversing about our deepest concerns, including moral ones, and perhaps especially moral ones. In this deepest sense, which Lamarque and Olsen fail to consider, literature *is* a kind of moral philosophy, and the contribution it offers is specific to its form. That is, all great literary works constitute themselves as spaces for conversing around the deepest moral questions, and here lies the essential connection between the art's moral and aesthetic value. No literary work is considered canonical that does not spark reflections upon the meaning of life and, in so doing, creates a sense of human connection between reader and writer.

As Wayne Booth writes in *The Company We Keep* (Booth 1988), in reading, we always respond to “the inferable voice of the flesh-and-blood person” (pp. 125–26) behind the artwork, and thus we “accept the responsibility to enter into serious dialogue with the author” (ibid., p. 135). Noël Carroll reiterates a similar point of view in “Art, Intention, and Conversation” (Carroll 1992), saying that we turn to art to “enter a relationship with [the] creator that is roughly analogous to a conversation” (p. 117) and that in it we seek “serious conversations” (ibid., p. 118) by which to establish “the prospect of community” (ibid.). Likewise, F.R. Leavis states in *The Living Principle* (Leavis 1975) that “words ‘mean’ because individual human beings have meant the meaning, and that there is no meaning unless individual human beings can meet in it” (p. 58).¹⁰

These critics all express views influenced by the late philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to this point of view, language is a tool for conversing and creating human community, and literature is one of the ways in which language achieves its goal.¹¹ It is, therefore, in the nature of literature to establish itself as a means for conversation between human beings, and this is why its value is determined by the depth of its subject matter and its treatment. After all, a conversation is as valuable as its contents, and so it is with literature. Perhaps *this* is the true morality of the art form.¹²

2.5. The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth

The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth affirms that “the literary work contains or implies general statements about the world which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work has to assess as true or false” (Lamarque and Olsen 2002, p. 325), and that the truth of these general statements is “what makes literature valuable” (ibid., p. 321).

Lamarque and Olsen say that this theory presents the strongest defense of literary truth: “if literary works present interpretations of general statements about human life, then, in so far as these statements are true and important, literature is valuable... And because literature as a body of works has this truth-telling function, it is, as are activities like philosophy and science, held in high regard” (ibid., pp. 325–26).

In the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth, the essence of literary value equates to stating consequential truths. Accordingly, the goal of criticism becomes enlightening and evaluating the propositional statements of literary works. This is why Lamarque and Olsen also highlight that the theory has “many advantageous *consequences*” (ibid., p. 326) for literary studies.

Yet, they argue that not even the Propositional Theory can withstand closer scrutiny. Specifically, the theory “gets into trouble” (ibid., p. 328) not when it affirms that literature presents true or false claims but when it states that the truth-value of these claims determines a work’s literary value. For Lamarque and Olsen, literature does contain true propositions, but the truth-value of these propositions has nothing to do with literary value. On the contrary, “judgments about interest are made with regard to content and are independent of judgments concerning truth” (ibid., p. 329).

But in response, we ought to ask: how can a judgment about the value of content not be one about truth? Lamarque and Olsen recognize that their thesis seems to violate one of the most widespread fundamental assumptions of ordinary life, i.e., that “truth is a precondition of a humanly interesting content” (ibid., p. 296). The violation of common sense is by no means a reason for criticism, but it is hard to see what literary content could be interesting without relating to the truth, and Lamarque and Olsen fail to provide valid examples.

For instance, they write that George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (Eliot [1871] 2003) implies the proposition that “the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control” (ibid., p. 336) and argue that the value of the novel is untouched by whatever conclusions the human community reaches regarding the nature of Being, free will, determinism, etc. And while their point of view seems reasonable, its logic is erroneous and implies a definition of “literary truth” that is too narrow.

On the contrary, the proposition that *Middlemarch* implies does contribute to the novel’s literary value. This is because it discusses a *possible* and *consequential* truth that—because possible and consequential—is of great interest to humanity.¹³ Whether and to what extent we decide over our lives is in fact what most interests us,¹⁴ and if *Middlemarch* can spark an in-depth conversation about the matter, then its literary value rises substantially. In addition, the problem of free will or determinism will remain a fundamental concern for a long time, and this will make *Middlemarch* a text of long-standing value if its framing can withstand the test of time.

In a future where we know the definitive answer to the question of freedom or determinism and are no longer interested in it, the novel will lose literary value. Not all its literary value, of course, but some and probably most of it, depending on how central the proposition is to the novel’s content. This hypothetical future is one where *Middlemarch* may be recognized as a great work of genius from the past, but where few people will read it, and only as a historical document, not as a work capable of illuminating matters of deep interest to human civilization.

This is what happened, for example, to the works of George Meredith (1828–1909). In his lifetime, he was so famous that he was nominated for the Nobel Prize seven times, but hardly anyone reads him today, and this must have a lot to do with the fact that his works largely treat political and social contingencies of the Victorian era rather than universal questions. And the same could be said of Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793–1835); she was a well-known literary figure, and her poetry was highly regarded by the likes of Wordsworth and Percy Shelley. Yet, because it was mostly valued for its nationalist and moralist content, her fame gradually declined, and she, too, was forgotten.

This is not to say that truth and universality are the only sources of literary value, but it is to say that they are certainly *part* of it, and arguably its most important element,¹⁵ and judgments about interest are not independent of judgments about truth; in fact, they mostly depend on judgments about truth. Lamarque and Olsen ignore this fundamental fact when they criticize the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth.

2.6. Conclusion on Literary Value without Truth

Lamarque and Olsen argue that while literary truth is a myth, literature remains valuable. They hold that their no-truth theory of literature does not commit them “to an arid aestheticism or to ‘cutting literature off from the world’ (a notion virtually incomprehensible)” (2002, p. 22),¹⁶ and that it provides a strong response to the denial of literary value by post-structuralism, anti-humanism, and reductionism—the strong response that literary humanism could never provide. Traditional defenses of literary value have always insisted on “the point where the humanistic conception is at its weakest” (ibid., p. 23), i.e., the claim that “literary works are true—but *not in the sense in which statements, hypotheses, historical treatises, etc. are true*” (ibid., p. 11), and “inasmuch as literature needs ‘defending’ for its fictionality it is pointless to try and do so in terms of truth; the hopelessness, and counter-productiveness, of this move is soon evident in the inevitable fudging of the idea of truth. ‘Imaginative’ or ‘literary’ truth always turns out to be something less than truth itself and the case falters from then on” (ibid., p. 21).

Lamarque and Olsen are right that the above notion of literary truth is something less than actual truth and therefore falters, but their criticism correctly applies only to “those who want a ‘stronger’ sense of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ applied to literature; i.e., those who see the aim of literature as conveying or teaching or embodying universal truths about human nature, the human condition, and so on, in a sense at least *analogous* to that in which scientific, or psychological, or historical hypotheses can express general truths” (ibid., p. 6).

When they shift their criticism to the notion of literary truth as a whole, their reasoning becomes non-defined and at times even contradictory, especially in their conclusion that “literary works can contribute to the development and understanding of the deepest, most revered or a culture’s conceptions without advancing propositions, statements, or hypotheses about them” (ibid., p. 22). As shown above, it is impossible for content to contribute to the development and understanding of conceptions without saying anything related to the truth-value of said conceptions, just as it is impossible to understand anything if one’s understanding is not related to the truth-value of that something.

When you understand, you understand the “intended meaning” and “significance, explanation, or cause of” something; you become “knowledgeably aware of the character or nature of” something (Hornby 2013). To understand something is to grasp its truth. Therefore, the notion of literary value without truth proposed by Lamarque and Olsen is contradictory and impossible. If literature has nothing to do with truth then it also has nothing to do with the fundamental conceptions of culture. This does not show that a pro-truth theory of literature must be true, but it shows that Lamarque and Olsen have failed to undermine the notion of literary truth and to overcome the traditional dichotomy between pro-truth defenses and no-truth rejections of literary value.

3. Confusing the Ontology of Literature with Matters of Literary Criticism

At times, Lamarque and Olsen confuse matters of literary ontology with matters of literary criticism. For example, they state that “metaphysical worries about the nature of objects, reality, the world, truth, and so forth, arise in connection with fiction but... can be dispelled—often shown to be irrelevant—in the context of literary criticism or theory” (2002, pp. 14–15). Here, they conflate criticism and theory and fail to account for the fact that if literary theory is the study of the nature of literature, then the ontological worries that arise in connection with fiction are the *most essential* concern for literary theory, i.e., precisely what *cannot* be dispelled from the analysis.

What to do “in the context of literary criticism” is a different matter, and if Lamarque and Olsen wish to “avoid dragging metaphysical questions into literary criticism” (ibid., p. 19), this has nothing to do with literary theory. We may discuss whether ontology should enter criticism, but a non-ontological literary theory is no theory at all. A critic might analyze, evaluate, and interpret works without addressing their ontology (even though every critic *will* inevitably postulate an ontology¹⁷), but a theorist cannot present an

explanation of the nature of literary artifacts without addressing their ontology (arguments in defense of this proposition follow in the next two sections).

In addition, when Lamarque and Olsen write that “debate about the truth and falsity of the propositions implied by a literary work is absent from literary criticism since it does not enter into *the appreciation of the work as a literary work*” (ibid., p. 334), their claim is quite simply historically false. Traditionally, criticism has indeed always been concerned with the truth-value of literary propositions, and this also shows no signs of changing.¹⁸

Let us refer again to *Middlemarch*’s implied statement that “the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control.” While it is certainly true that “a debate about the substance of this thematic statement will be a debate about the possibility of free will and this is central in philosophy” (ibid., p. 336), it is nonetheless not the case that “the critic is free to join this debate, of course, but when he does he has moved on from literary appreciation of *Middlemarch*” (ibid.).

First, the debate on the novel’s implied statement is not divorced from considerations regarding the novel’s other literary qualities (form, plot, characterization, etc.). On the contrary, it necessarily involves reflection on said qualities to evaluate the development of the novel’s theme. Second, precisely because all these dimensions are inextricably tied in the novel, to evaluate the novel one must consider its theme and its central importance, and this proves that literary evaluation is always also partly philosophical, not that the critic who thinks about the theme is doing philosophy rather than literary criticism.¹⁹

4. On Richard Rorty and the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction

Lamarque and Olsen take issue with Richard Rorty’s pragmatism as paradigmatic of the widespread attack in contemporary thinking against the correspondence theory of truth and, consequently, against the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. They reject pro-truth theories of literature but do not deny that “the truth per se exists” and that “subjects like philosophy, history, psychology, science, etc.” can express it. On the contrary, Rorty establishes his denial of literary truth on the denial of truth per se, and this is why Lamarque and Olsen argue against him.

Rorty’s argument runs as follows: (1) the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse depends on a conception of truth as correspondence, according to which fact-stating discourse refers to what is out there (objects and facts) while fiction makes things up; (2) the correspondence theory of truth is untenable; and (3) therefore, the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse is illusory.

The consequences of this argument are extreme: if the correspondence theory of truth is incorrect, the entirety of human discourse is fictional, and since we cannot refer to the world out there, everything we think and say is therefore made up. Lamarque and Olsen call this “the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction” (2002, p. 174). They concede that it presents “a powerful argument” (ibid., p. 190) in support of “metaphysical anti-realism” (ibid.) and of skepticism about “the idea of a ‘privileged’ discourse” (ibid.), but they reject the idea that “we should abandon altogether the distinction between fiction-making and truth-telling” (ibid.), and they claim that their work “exposes as a myth the alleged ‘ubiquity of fiction’” (ibid., p. 191).

They seek to do this first by showing that it is possible to accept anti-realism, constructivism, or pragmatism while retaining the notions of truth and objectivity: “even if philosophical anti-realism is true, even if we accept constructivist theories of knowledge or pragmatist or coherentist theories of truth, we still need to retain some conception of an objective world, some distinction between a fictional invention and a real object, some distinction between different ends of discourse” (ibid., pp. 190–91).

Yet, their proposal here is once again contradictory. Anti-realism, constructivism, and pragmatism, when properly developed, necessarily result in the outright rejection of truth and objectivity. One cannot accept any of these philosophies and reject the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction. The denial of the correspondence theory of truth entails the impossibility of knowing what is out there, and hence of knowing the truth. Rorty is thus

more coherent than Lamarque and Olsen: you either know the truth or you *invent* it; you cannot call your invention objective.

But secondly, Lamarque and Olsen argue that “there simply is no unitary notion of fiction” (ibid., p. 191) that unites the various theories of the ubiquity of fiction and “this lack of unity exposes as a myth the alleged ‘ubiquity of fiction’” (ibid.). Yet, here again, even if the premise were true, the conclusion would not follow. There is no reason to think that the existence of myriad particular theories of the ubiquity of fiction undermines their fundamental idea. There are myriad different theories of capitalism. Does this make capitalism a myth? There have been myriad definitions of philosophy throughout history. Does this make the existence of philosophy a myth? It is true that “Kant’s ‘synthesis,’ Bentham’s ‘fictitious entities,’ Russell’s ‘logical constructions,’ Quine’s ‘posits,’ Dennett’s ‘notional worlds,’ Vaihinger’s ‘as if’” (ibid.) all conceptualize different theories of fiction, but this does not undermine the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction. If anything, the presence of so many divergent theories that agree on the foundation supports the idea of the Ubiquity of Fiction.

4.1. *Metaphysics and Literature*

That Lamarque and Olsen fail to undermine the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction does not mean that the theory cannot be undermined. In fact, one significant reason why they fail to undermine the theory is that they share with Rorty the wish to not engage in metaphysics—ontology. They want to both corroborate Rorty’s rejection of metaphysics and refuse his “extreme rhetoric, characterizing a widespread trend in modern thought, according to which there is no ‘real world,’ what exists is just what is constructed, truth is an illusion, fiction is everywhere” (2002, p. 162) and “the discourses of science, philosophy, literature, history, the social sciences, are more or less arbitrarily distinguished and rest on nothing more fundamental than institutional divisions of labor” (ibid., p. 161).

But to reject Rorty’s conclusions, one *must* do metaphysics. With their work, Lamarque and Olsen try to present an objectively true definition of literature as well as defenses of the objective world and of truth itself. All of their propositions, precisely by aspiring to be true, are thus inherently metaphysical. Therefore, in trying to present true propositions that claim to be non-metaphysical, Lamarque and Olsen are both trying to present truths that present themselves as non-truths (i.e., non-metaphysical) and trying to do metaphysics while claiming that metaphysics should not enter the domain of literary theory.

The contradictions in their work are thus especially salient here. And these same contradictions affect Rorty too, as he “is insistent that there are implications for literature in what he says about truth” (ibid., p. 194), and he argues that once the correspondence theory of truth falls, then the distinction between fact-stating and fictional discourse falls too, and then “there is no longer much point in trying to distinguish literature from philosophy” (ibid.).

Rorty’s conclusions coherently follow from the premise, but the premise—that is, the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth—is far from free from metaphysics; in fact, it is entirely metaphysical. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989) is where Rorty, after rejecting the idea of objective truth, defines literature accordingly: “the word ‘literature’ now covers just about every sort of book which might conceivably have moral relevance—might conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important” (p. 82). In response, Lamarque and Olsen write that “the only direct support” (ibid.) Rorty offers in favor of his definition is “changing the meaning of key terms” (ibid., p. 194), which “clearly” exhibits the “very weak ground” (ibid., p. 195) on which his argument rests.

Yet, this accusation of arbitrariness can be leveled at Rorty only for attributing moral value to literature (he does not provide grounds for this), and not for abolishing the distinction between fact and fiction, which he does ground in the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth.

Therefore, the only way to disprove Rorty is to explicitly do what both Rorty and Lamarque and Olsen do but claim not to do: that is, do metaphysics and ground their

literary theory on the metaphysical theory. In order to show that the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction is wrong, one must show that Rorty's rejection of the correspondence theory of truth is untenable. If the foundation does not hold, everything built upon it falls to the ground.

4.2. Contradictions in Rorty's Pragmatism

Rorty divides philosophers into metaphysicians and ironists. Metaphysicians believe in Truth, the Enlightenment, and "take science as the paradigmatic human activity" (1989, p. 3). They "insist that natural science discovers truth rather than makes it" (ibid.), and they contrast "'hard scientific fact' with the 'subjective' or with 'metaphor'" (ibid., p. 4). On the other contrary, ironists see "science as one more human activity" (ibid.) and scientists as people who "invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. These philosophers regard the very idea of such a representation as pointless" (ibid., pp. 8–9).

In short, ironists (pragmatists) see that the correspondence theory of truth is false and pointless, that all discourses are fictional, and that this is no cause for despair. Everything Rorty says on literature depends on this outlook, and this is why the strongest refutation of his literary theory is a refutation of this outlook. This analytical refutation is beyond the scope of this writing, but an indication of part of the argument can be sketched.

In defending the ironic outlook, Rorty affirms that "to say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states" (ibid., p. 5). This is a disguised concession and one that already provides sufficient ground to negate both Rorty's freedom from metaphysics (his affirmation of the existence of the objective world is metaphysical, and this is the first auto-contradiction) and his Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction (his statement that the world exists intends to be objective, i.e., non-fictional, and this is the second auto-contradiction).²⁰

Rorty's idol, Nietzsche, would have never made such a concession, because he knew that it would contradict the whole Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction. If the ubiquity of fiction is true, life must be pure relativism and will to power, and not even the existence of an objective world can be affirmed. If there is no truth, then that there is a world out there cannot be affirmed. Also, no principle can establish what is right or wrong. Therefore, human beings have the right to say and do anything. Nothing is right and nothing is wrong, *per se*. What makes something right is the will of the powerful over the weak. In a world where all discourses are fictional, the only truth is power (and a democratic vote only expresses the power of the majority over the weakness of the minority). This is the great teaching of Ivan Karamazov and Zarathustra: because there is no God, everything is permitted.²¹

If truth is a human construct, then truth, knowledge, and morality are arbitrary agreements established by those who have power. In "Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?" (Rorty 1982), Rorty asks "how would it be different if everything were a dream? How would it be different if it were all *made up*? How would it be different if there were nothing there to be represented? How does having knowledge differ from making poems and telling stories?" (pp. 128–29). For Rorty, this is a rhetorical question, but for us, it exhibits his inability to see the most profound consequences of his own philosophy. In this sense, Lamarque and Olsen rightly note that Descartes pursued philosophy and wrote his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes [1641] 2017) precisely because he realized that if it were all made up then life would become a "solipsistic nightmare" (Lamarque and Olsen 2002, p. 164); that is, everything would change, as Nietzsche too knew very well.

If there is no truth, there are no constraints to action, no justice, no moral and ethical boundaries. Justice is the war of all against all, life is the war of all against all. Rorty's unwillingness to affirm these conclusions—and his attempt to save, "with common sense",

the objective world—speak of the fundamental contradictions in his philosophy and of his inability to follow its logic to its necessary end. His affirmations violate the fundamental principles of his metaphysics, which themselves lack foundation. This is what ultimately condemns his literary theory beyond doubt.

5. On the Ontology of Fiction²²

Lamarque and Olsen write that “to say of a thing that it is fictional is to suggest that it does not exist, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *unreal*. To say of a description that it is fictional is to suggest that it is not true, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *false*” (2002, p. 16).

This is common sense, today, and an outlook influenced in literary theory by two great thinkers of the twentieth century: Bertrand Russell and Nelson Goodman. In *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Russell [1950] 1995), Russell wrote of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Shakespeare [1603] 2013) that “the propositions in the play are false because there was no such man” (Russell [1950] 1995, p. 294). And in *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Goodman 1984), Goodman stated that “all fiction is literal, literary falsehood” (p. 124).

According to this theory, fiction speaks of things that do not exist, it affirms the existence of the non-existent, and this is why it is false: because it violates the most fundamental principle of rationality—the principle of noncontradiction—as described by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*: “to say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true” (Aristotle 1998, 1011b 26).

Once again, then, this theory is necessarily ontological–metaphysical and presupposes belief in the correspondence theory of truth, i.e., belief that what “exists” are things out there and that the truth is referring to them correctly. Only on this basis can Russell, Goodman, Lamarque, and Olsen say that the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because there is no flesh-and-blood human being called “Hamlet.”

Yet, this common-sense theory is highly questionable. Why should fictional objects refer to something outside themselves? Why should reference to something out there be the only arbiter of truth? Is “material” existence the only possible kind of existence? These are ontological questions, and everything we decide about the nature of literary fiction depends on them. The fundamental question here is “what is a fictional object?” and this depends on the even more fundamental question “what is a thing?” This is the central question of ontology. Inquiring into literary theory leads immediately to the essential questions of philosophy and to questioning our fundamental interpretation of reality.

Russell, Goodman, Lamarque, and Olsen accuse fiction of speaking of things that are not; but 2500 years ago, Parmenides taught us that we cannot speak and think of things that are not, we cannot speak and think of nothingness. To say that fiction is false because it affirms the existence of the non-existent is to say that human beings, through fiction, think and speak of nothingness. But Parmenides warned us: “For never shall this be forced: that things that are not exist” (Parmenides 1965, p. 73); “you could not know that which does not exist (because it is impossible) nor could you express it” (ibid., p. 32).

What is not (i.e., what does not exist) is nothingness, and nothingness cannot appear, and what cannot appear is not available to human thought, speech, or knowledge. It is thus impossible to think, speak, and know of what is not. To believe that it is possible is to violate the principle of non-contradiction, the essential principle of rationality, without which meaningful speech cannot be uttered. In other words: it is to believe the incontrovertibly impossible. And the common-sense theory that fiction is false because it speaks of what is not does exactly this: violate the fundamental law of rationality. It violates it by postulating that fiction speaks of nothingness (what is not), thus treating something (the content or object of fiction) as nothing and judging its nature on the basis of this contradiction.

Parmenides’s great fault was in his belief that to remain coherent with the principle of non-contradiction, he had to affirm the illusoriness of life. In the *History of Western Philosophy* (Russell [1945] 2004), Russell exhibits this Parmenidean contradiction, but he does not see that the argument by which he exposes it also shows the contradiction in his

own thinking about fictional objects. That is, just like all everyday objects, the propositions of *Hamlet* appear, and so does the character “Hamlet” to which the propositions refer. Therefore, precisely because all these things appear, they *are*, and therefore they are real.

“Hamlet” exists. It constitutes a specific part of reality, just like every other entity, because there is no entity that is not. Everything has its mode of existence, and therefore its true description is coherent with the proper mode of the existence of the object described.²³ Thus, the claim that the propositions in *Hamlet* refer to nothing is untenable. But one might insist that Russell indicates that the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because they speak of a *flesh-and-blood human being* named Hamlet, and such a being clearly does not exist. Yet, this too is false, because the propositions in *Hamlet* do *not* affirm the existence of a flesh-and-blood human being named “Hamlet” but rather that of a fictional character named “Hamlet.” They thus attribute the proper mode of existence to their object and are in this sense, once again, true.

For this reason, Lamarque and Olsen are right in criticizing Russell and Goodman because, if one were to “utter assertorically” the propositions in *Hamlet*, these would not translate as “‘Hamlet’ is a flesh-and-blood human being” but as “Hamlet is a fictional character who exists only in accordance with the fiction wherein it appears, and in accordance with the mode of existence that is proper to it.” As David Lewis previously argued in “Truth and Fiction” (Lewis 1978), all descriptions of fictional characters should be understood to implicitly begin with the operator “In such-and-such fiction. . . .” (Lamarque and Olsen criticize Russell and Goodman for their inability to see this, but nonetheless reiterate that fiction is false because it speaks of what is not—this is a further contradiction we will not go into).

This means that there is no sense in which fictional propositions violate the principle of non-contradiction. On the contrary, it is the judgment uttered by Russell, Goodman, Lamarque, and Olsen that does. Fictional propositions do not say that what is not is. They do not even attribute an improper mode of existence to the entities they describe. The character “Hamlet” is, and exists, and is real as a character, and it belongs to reality precisely as a fictional character. The propositions in the play refer to “Hamlet” in the mode of existence that is proper to it, and therefore it cannot be said of *Hamlet* that its propositions are false.

What is false is the theory that treats only “material” things as real, and we can say that it is false because it violates the principle of non-contradiction by treating things that are as nothing. It is because of its inherent contradiction that the theory leads to wrong judgments. Everything that appears—whatever its mode of appearance—exists. The golden mountain and the unicorn exist in the proper mode of existence that belongs to them. Statements about them can be false if they attribute false modes of existence to them, but fiction does not do this. The reality of fictional objects is what allows their appearance in thought. If they were nothing, if they did not exist, we could not imagine them, nor talk about them, nor mistakenly affirm their falsity or non-existence.²⁴

6. Conclusions

None of the above establishes a pro-truth theory of literature, but it does challenge many assumptions in literary theory and philosophy of literature today that lead contemporary thinkers to lean towards no-truth theories. The criticism that Lamarque and Olsen level at past theories is often extremely valuable, but in this writing, we focused on where their theory falters in an attempt to further propel critical thinking on some fundamental issues in literary theory.

Questions concerning the ontology of literary fiction and literary value remain open. Meanwhile, readers continue to read in the belief that literature is profound and true in exploring the depths of human nature and can teach something significant about ourselves and the world. If no theory has ever presented a successful and comprehensive account of this process, this does not mean that such a theory cannot see the light of day. Readers hold literary content to be interesting because it is true or potentially true. This is a

necessary precondition for believing that, in reading, we converse with authors about profound human concerns. Maurice Merleau-Ponty testified to this experience in *The Prose of the World* (Merleau-Ponty [1969] 1974): “I have access to Stendhal’s outlook through the commonplace words he uses. But in his hands these words are given a new twist. The cross-references multiply. More and more arrows point in the direction of a thought I have never encountered before, and perhaps never would have met without Stendhal” (p. 12). So did John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* (Mill [1873] 1981): “Wordsworth’s poems [are] a medicine for my state of mind... Wordsworth taught me... the common feelings and common destiny of human beings” (pp. 150, 152).

Wordsworth taught Mill the true feelings and destiny of human beings. Catherine Wilson writes in “Literature and Knowledge” (Wilson 1983) that experiences of the kind described by Merleau-Ponty and Mill can occur only if the reader “(a) recognizes the conception presented in the novel as superior to his own and (b) adopts it, in recognition of its superiority, so that it comes to serve as a kind of standard by which he reviews his own conduct and that of others” (p. 495). Likewise, Robert Stecker argues in “What Is Literature?” (Stecker 1996) that such results can take place only if the reading experience consists of “(1) vivid conceptions we derive from the work” (p. 688) and “(2) what we learn about ourselves, and more speculatively, of other people, when we see how we react to these conceptions” (ibid., p. 688). In other words, Stecker submits that in literature we gain “cognitive value” that “consists in the provision of new ways of thinking (new conceptions) about potentially any aspect of human experience, in such a way that we do not merely entertain such ideas in the abstract, but we concretely imagine what one does and feels when one thinks of the world in this way” (ibid.); new ways of thinking that “we take away from the work for the purpose of being able to think better about the actual world” (ibid.).

The cognitive value sketched here is unimaginable without literary truth. The conceptions offered in the literary work must have truth-value if one is to confront them, decide upon them, and adopt or discard them. To use Lamarque and Olsen’s language, said conceptions must have truth-value if they are to “contribute to the development and understanding of the deepest, most revered or a culture’s conceptions.” Otherwise, it would be impossible for literary works to relate to our lived experience at all.

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Notes

- ¹ The reader may ask, why choose this book from 1994 as representative of a common outlook in literary theory today? The answer rests on two considerations: (1) it remains one of the most comprehensive analyses of the different waves in literary theory and thus provides an effective platform for a broad understanding of the field, and (2) the framework it outlines is still highly influential. For example, on its basis, Peter Lamarque wrote the subsequent *The Philosophy of Literature* (Lamarque 2008), a textbook used in philosophy of literature syllabi all over the world. And more importantly, as Roger Marples writes in “Art, knowledge and moral understanding” (Marples 2017), it is still a fact that the “view that art is incapable of providing us with knowledge is sufficiently widely held as to merit a serious attempt at refutation” (243). In this sense, the influence of Lamarque’s work is visible in many contemporary studies. Margit Sutrop’s “Imagination and the Act of Fiction-Making” (Sutrop 2002) quotes it in arguing that “lack of reference and truth-value” (332) are necessary conditions to establish the fictionality of a work of art. And so does Rafe McGregor, in both “Narrative Representation and Phenomenological Knowledge” (McGregor 2016) and “The Ethical Value of Narrative Representation” (McGregor 2017), contend that narrative representations can provide knowledge and ethical value, “regardless of their truth value” (327). Robert Eaglestone’s “Navigating an Ancient Problem: Ethics and Literature” (Eaglestone 2003) mentions Lamarque as one of many theorists who made it possible to talk about ethics in literature without referring to truth value. And Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett, in “Researching the social impact of the arts: literature, fiction and the novel” (Belfiore and Bennett 2009), quote the book repeatedly in constructing their institutional view of literature. Finally, there are also works that, like the present one, deem it necessary to criticize Lamarque and Olsen, e.g., Christopher Mole’s “The Matter of Fact in Literature” (Mole 2009) and Alan Goldman’s *Philosophy and the Novel* (Goldman 2013). Especially Goldman’s work, in fact, establishes a precedent for one of the arguments below by asserting that neither Lamarque and Olsen’s theory that

literary truth is irrelevant to literary value nor the opposite view that literary value depends on the assertion of moral truths are viable.

In using “literature” as an evaluative term, Lamarque and Olsen follow Colin Lyas’s “The Semantic Definition of Literature” (Lyas 1969) and Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (Eagleton [1983] 2008). They also extend its evaluative significance beyond the aesthetic into the cultural.

E.g., Henry James explicitly said: “the novel is history” (James 1948, p. 5).

In *Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Postmodernism* (Falck 1989), for example, Colin Falck writes that “literature... gives us our purest and most essential way of grasping reality or truth” (ibid. xii), and that “the connection between art and ontological truth [is] a necessary and definitional one” (ibid., p. 74). Lamarque and Olsen show why claims such as these are unfounded and ungrounded.

As non-naïve defenders of scientific rationality, the logical positivists knew that causality, other minds, natural laws, etc. (and myriad other ideas taken for granted) are not facts but metaphysical theories, i.e., interpretations of what appears.

On Tolstoy’s ideal of truth-embodiment in literature see also (Pitari 2021a). For the same framework applied to Jean-Paul Sartre and David Foster Wallace see (Pitari 2020).

On the influence of Aeschylus throughout western culture see (Pitari 2022).

The modern origin of these theories resides in the influential work done by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (Kant [1790] 1987) regarding the connection between aesthetic judgment and moral feeling.

Despite the fact that Nussbaum and Putnam are by no means the only ones to argue for a thesis of this kind. Berys Gaut, for example, argues in “The Ethical Criticism of Art” (Gaut 1998) for “literary ethicism”: i.e., the idea that literary value is a matter of “ethical assessment”; that “if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious” (182). The absurdity of this thesis is readily demonstrated by the fact that, according to Gaut’s theory, the literary value of, say, *Lolita* (Nabokov [1955] 2011), depends on whether the novel morally condemns its protagonist.

On the same note, Robert Grant argues in “Fiction, Meaning, and Utterance” (Grant 2001) that authorial “‘intention’... is public, in the work. Fictions are utterances of a curious kind... Their logical form is actually this: ‘I [author] invite you [reader] to imagine that S [content].’ This prescribes no response, nor claims to describe the ‘real’ world, even though it may elicit a response appropriate to real-life events” (389). And Knapp and Michaels write in “Against Theory” (Knapp and Michaels 1982) that the fundamental and mistaken premise of all literary theory is the inability to see that “the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author’s intended meaning” (724).

A view shared by Emmanuel Lévinas who wrote in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Lévinas [1974] 1978): “we suppose that there is in the transcendence involved in language a relationship that is not empirical speech, but responsibility” (120).

In the most famous work of literary phenomenology, entitled *The Literary Work of Art* (Ingarden [1931] 1973), Roman Ingarden presents literary texts as doubly intentional objects, where both the author’s intention to create meaning and the reader’s intention to decode meaning collaborate in the establishment of the object’s substance. It is interesting to see how this phenomenological approach coheres with the Wittgensteinian view. It is also worth noting that works such as Toril Moi’s *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Moi 2017) and James Conant’s “Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth. Rorty versus Orwell” (Conant 2000) present a Wittgensteinian point of view that challenges some of the arguments in this article and are worth reading for a nuanced take on meaning in literature and its logical relation to truth (as an anonymous reviewer kindly suggested).

The assumption of the necessity of literary truth for literary value can also be seen in Jerome Bump’s analysis of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (Eliot [1860] 2015) in “The Value of Literature, Today and Tomorrow” (Bump 2022). Bump writes that “one of the chief accomplishments of the nineteenth-century ethical aesthetic was George Eliot’s attempts in her novels to teach ‘humanism’, a secular version of ‘love your neighbor’” (3). Significantly, Bump specifies that—citing Eliot herself—the possibility of such ethical value in literature depends on the author’s ability to “plung[e] into ‘the mysterious complexity of our life’” (ibid., p. 14) and to be “inspired by ‘the growing insight and sympathy of a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human’” (ibid.). These passages show that Eliot herself thought of literary truth as necessary for literary value, and that Bump interpreted her work accordingly. She wrote of “insight” into the complexity of “our life” as necessary for the creation of sympathy, and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “insight” means “an instance of apprehending the true nature of a thing”, or “faculty of seeing into inner character of underlying truth” (Hornby 2013). Eliot’s thinking was perfectly logical because understanding and sharing the feelings of others would be impossible without the ability to grasp their true contents, and consequently, literature would be unable to represent the inner worlds of humans if it were unable to grasp their true contents.

“How does an individual understand her or his position in the world? Are we determined by our genetic heritage, social circumstances and cultural preferences—and only tricked into believing that we make our own choices? By whom? Other individuals who have been determined similarly? Or are we autonomous—wholly or partly—and, if so, then to what degree? Are we or are we not autonomous enough to control and change the legacy fate has landed us with? How does selfhood emerge? Does it follow the same pattern of development in all people, all cultures, all ages? Or is it itself a socio-cultural construction that should be viewed in its historical context? If so, then what is happening right now—are the patterns of selfhood changing in the present world? Does contemporary technology allow us more autonomy—or does it tempt us to give up the freedoms we have?

A host of questions...All the dilemmas from which they arise could be plotted on the same axis—one end of which is designated by fate and determination and the other by choice and freedom” (Bauman and Raud 2015, vii–viii).

Especially if one agrees with Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Aristotle [335 BC] 1987) that “poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts” (1451b).

Lamarque and Olsen here align with what E.D. Hirsch writes in “What Isn’t Literature?” (Hirsch 1978): “to regard literature as primarily aesthetic is not only a mistake; it is also a very unfortunate narrowing of our responses to literature, and our perceptions of its breadth and possibilities” (p. 28).

In the twentieth century, critics such as Richard Wollheim in *Art and its Objects* (Wollheim [1968] 1980), Monroe Beardsley in “The Concept of Literature” (Beardsley 1973), John Searle in “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse” (Searle 1975), J.O. Urmson in “Literature” (Urmson 1977), and Gregory Currie in “What is Fiction?” (Currie 1985) knew that all criticism must always presuppose a certain ontology even merely by virtue of adopting a certain logic. Therefore, they knew that critics should address these ontological concerns to ground their analyses.

Many scholars argue against Lamarque and Olsen here, e.g., Lionel Trilling in “The Poet as Hero; Keats in his Letters” (Trilling [1951] 1980), M.W. Rowe in “Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth” (Rowe [1997] 2004), and Piero Boitani in *Letteratura e verità* (*Literature and Truth*, (Boitani 2013)). Writers, too, generally evaluate their work in terms of truth-value. For example, W.H. Auden wrote the following about the famous line, “We must love one another or die”, in his poem “September 1, 1939” (Auden 1979): “I said to myself ‘That’s a damned lie! We must die anyway.’ So, in the next edition, I altered it to ‘We must love one another and die.’ This didn’t do either, so I cut the stanza. Still no good! The whole poem, I realized, was infected with an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped” (Mendelson 1981, pp. 326–27).

We explored *Middlemarch*, but we could have looked at any other classic. The statement that “criticism has indeed always been concerned with the truth-value of literary propositions” simply means that we, as readers, are interested in literary artifacts not as pure forms but as bearers of meanings whose truth-value we care about. For example, in *Shakespearean Criticism*, S. T. Coleridge wrote that in *Hamlet* “Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth, that action is the chief end of existence” (Coleridge 1960, vol. ii, p. 154). In *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes* (2009), L. B. Campbell argued that *Hamlet* is “rather obviously constructed to show the profound truth of its dominant idea” that human beings are slaves to their own passions (Campbell 2009, p. 109). And in “*Hamlet*: Philosophy and the Intruder”, M. Weitz said that in *Hamlet* “life is and remains a mystery” (Weitz 1963b, p. 67) and that Shakespeare is a “philosophical artist” who “dramatizes the denial of any convincing solution to the mystery” (ibid.). These critics disagreed about the character of *Hamlet*’s truths, but they agreed on the basic premise that the play does embody certain truths, whatever they are. In this sense, another exemplary classic would be Voltaire’s *Candide* (Voltaire [1759] 1958), that great novelistic affirmation of Enlightenment ideals. The novel’s maxim is “il faut cultiver notre jardin” (p. 106): that is, humankind must work to improve living conditions on earth, it is our responsibility to do so, and no god will help us. Jeffrey Hart wrote in *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* (Hart 2001) that *Candide* is the enemy of “junk thought.” On the contrary, George Orwell in “Politics vs. Literature” (Orwell [1946] 1968) preferred *Gulliver’s Travels* and its representation of “the horror of existence” (p. 222) over *Candide*’s illusions of human sovereignty. But once again, what interests us is that, beneath their disagreement, Hart and Orwell agreed that the point of reading and judging the novel is grasping its intended meaning and evaluating its truth value.

For this reason, both this article and Lamarque and Olsen may be incorrectly accused of attributing to Rorty the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction when he himself granted that we *can* tell what is true from false. The fact is that the inconsistency resides in Rorty himself: it is Rorty who affirms the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction and then contradicts himself by allowing objectivity.

Likewise, the Theory of the Ubiquity of Fiction entails the absolute freedom of interpretation and the radical pluralism of works such as Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* (De Man [1971] 1983), J. Hillis Miller’s “Tradition and Difference” (Hillis Miller 1972), and E.D. Hirsch “Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics” (Hirsch 1972). For oppositions to radical pluralism see Stanley Fish’s “How Ordinary is Ordinary Language” (Fish [1973] 1980a) and “Is There a Text in This Class?” (Fish 1980b), Alexander Nehamas’s “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal” (Nehamas 1981), Robert Stecker’s “Art Interpretation” (Stecker 1994), and Umberto Eco’s “On Some Functions of Literature” (Eco [2004] 2006).

This section offers an indication of how a coherent starting point for a theory of fictional objects might be outlined; developing a truly demonstrative argument for such a theory would require a much lengthier work.

There are many further complications regarding the matter of defining modes of existence. When examining common sense, e.g., it is not clear what is fictional and what is not. For example, in *Narrative and the Self* (Kerby 1991), Anthony Kerby—reiterating Paul Ricoeur’s argument in “History as Narrative and Practice” (Ricoeur 1979)—writes that “it is as a character in our (and other people’s) narratives that we achieve an identity” (p. 40). This is a common outlook in the humanities today: we think of our identities as fictional characters. But should this entail that our identities are not? Are not real? Are nothing? This example shows with clarity the paradoxes our current theory runs into, given how consequential our perceived identities are in our everyday lives.

Alexius Meinong’s “The Theory of Objects” (Meinong [1904] 1981) might represent a first step toward the recognition of the reality of fictional objects. Meinong expresses the self-evidence of the Parmenidean principle and on that basis affirms that non-material objects such as the “golden mountain”—since they do appear to human consciousness—possess “being.” In this sense, he sees that fictional objects are real. But on the other hand, being influenced by empiricism, he attributes “existence” only

to empirical objects, differentiating “being” from “existence.” This differentiation might work if “existence” were interpreted as only one possible mode of being. But if granting “existence” only to empirical objects entails the nothingness of fictional objects, then we are back to violating the principle of non-contradiction. The distinction is thus likely to cause confusion. The recognition that everything that appears is, and appears *in experience*, must lead to the awareness that there is no difference between “being” and “existence”, and that *everything is empirical* precisely because everything appears in experience (consciousness), including fictional objects. Therefore, the “golden mountain” both is and exists. Again: if it was but did not exist, it would not appear, and we could neither think nor speak about it nor mistakenly affirm its non-existence.

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