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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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# *Literary Cognitive Benefits as Undecidable Mental Models*

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ABSTRACT. Peter Lamarque has suggested that literature could not win the "battle for ideas" without engaging with a (propositional) truth theory of literary value. Thus, denying the theoretical role of truth in the aesthetic appreciation of literary works seems to compel us to leave any disputing arena. In that sense, accepting Peter Lamarque's arguments can be considered a wrong framework for any cognitivist approach to literature since his narrative opacity thesis seems to exclude a cognitivist elucidation. In this article, I briefly discuss that set of inferences. Firstly, I question the Lamarquean approach concerning the battle for ideas concept. Secondly, I propose an elucidation of the narrative opacity, which pretends to be cognitivist and non-truth dependent.

## **1. Introduction**

The reason frequently offered for denying the cognitive value of literature is that literature has nothing to do with truth. According to many philosophical and poetic traditions, truth does not play any role in literary reading. For Aristotle, for example, the specific value of poetics is *verisimilitude*, not truth. Thus, in biological terms, an animal can be wrongly described in a poem but remain poetically persuasive because poets *only* need those elements from reality that can be convincingly recognized by the reader (*Poetics*, 1460b 30). Similarly, according to Frege, someone interested in literature cannot be worried about the truth of literary statements; they can be true, but it does not matter. Thus, denying the value of truth in a literary reading implies putting aside any concern about reference (Frege, 1960, pp. 62-63). Finally, Coleridge

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talked about a "willing suspension of disbelief" as the core of poetic faith (Tomko, 2015), and, according to Freud, there are two kinds of uncanny experience, from which the literary uncanny does not presuppose a *reality-testing* (Freud, 1974, pp. 263-264).

However, although Peter Lamarque's philosophical approach to literature also rejects any role of truth in literary reading, he takes a step forward from tradition, inferring that literature does not necessarily provide cognitive benefits. Thus, his position seems a little bit counter-intuitive, at least as seen through the eyes of philosophical tradition. Furthermore, an additional step, which is an apparent restriction, says that any non-standard conception of truth is useless for the cognitivist's claims or, in other words, that only a propositional truth theory of literary value can be acceptable for winning a place in "the battle for ideas." Thus, according to Lamarque, assuming that step and attacking a standard propositional truth theory of literary value seem sufficient to hear the retreat. Even more, any other traditional non-standard conception of truth and knowledge is finally not analyzed.

This paper discusses the Lamarquean set of premises from which a cognitivist approach to literature is denied. The first step consists of a brief review of Louis Althusser's Aesthetics. His theses are relevant in this context because he did not presuppose alternative theories of truth and knowledge; instead, that traditional theoretical background is compatible with a cognitivist approach to literature. The second step revisits the Lamarquean concept of narrative opacity to suggest a cognitivist interpretation, keeping in mind, for its part, the outcomes of the second step and a schematic elucidation of Maeve Cooke's remarks on Franz Kafka's prose. I finally conclude that the very concept of narrative opacity can be an optimal theoretical candidate to fight for the cause of ideas.

## 2. Truth and Opacity

There are many possible uses of literature. For example, we can use it as a pill because maybe we get to sleep with difficulties, and someone told us that a dense, extensive, even boring historical novel is the perfect non-pharmaceutical solution to that uncomfortable problem. To give another example, we can also use literature for historical purposes, not only for therapeutic ones. Let us say, for example, that we are interested in searching several conceptual representations of mental and physical health throughout history. Unlike that boring historical novel, *The Idiot*, the extraordinary work written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, can perfectly satisfy

our search. Reading that novel looking for symptoms or even comparing them with medical literature seems a proper way to find relevant historical information. This imaginative exercise, however, is not merely a hypothetical one. Many readers have been interested in, for example, understanding the actual Dostoevsky's physical health by analyzing fictional information on epilepsy (Bauman et al, 2005, p. 327) or identifying autism symptoms in Prince Myshkin's behavior (Bogdashina, 2013, p. 16). Moreover, Dostoevsky's works have been constituted an object of psychoanalytic interest too. Sigmund Freud wrote an essay on Dostoevsky's mind through biographical information as well as fictional one (Freud, 1961). However, despite that broad spectrum of uses, we can ask whether they actually constitute examples of literary uses of literary texts. If using literature as literature implies these examples, truth seems to be a literary value among possible others. Furthermore, if literature implies truth, literature also implies obvious cognitive benefits. Is then literature merely one among others in the universe of human cognoscitive practices?

Peter Lamarque's response is clearly *no*. According to him, truth has no part in interpreting and appreciating literature at all. Therefore, if truth has nothing to do with literature, Lamarque says, narrative literary works do not necessarily provide cognitive benefits, which implies, for its part, that there are no alternative epistemic sources for a possible literary knowledge other than truth. Moreover, his arguments against a role for truth in literature discard any non-propositional theory of truth or knowledge. Thus, by postulating some categorical distinctions, Lamarque sets out four main arguments. These categorical distinctions are organized in two combined pairs.

The first pair consists of distinguishing between, on the one hand, the explicit propositional content of a literary work and, on the other, the derived propositional content. The second pair differentiates between, on the one hand, the subject-level content of a literary work and, on the other, the thematic-level content. Combined, these two pairs are helpful, according to Lamarque, for finding "propositions, of a kind eligible for truth-valuation, in poetry or works of fiction" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 128). Therefore, a literary work contains explicit and implicit fictional information (corresponding with the subject level) and thematic information that can also be implicit or explicit. However, as we will see later, the thematic level does not constitute a category of literary interest because it entails a theoretical value for readers interested in *reality-testing*. Let us now briefly consider the four arguments and then a schematic description of narrative opacity.

According to the first argument attacked by Lamarque, the aesthetic appreciation of literary texts requires no mistake or false information in their subject levels. For example, any historical, scientific, or medical mistake in the implicit subject level of a literary work can be seen as an aesthetic problem. Departing from Ricks (1990), Lamarque notes that George Eliot in *Middlemarch* initially described "bright dilated eyes" as an effect "from taking opium"; however, "when she learned that pupils contract from opium, she changed the passage, in a later edition, to 'with a strange light in his eyes.'" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 130). According to the pro-truth supporters, that "mistake" and many others are evidence of the dependence of fiction on truth. Thus, appreciating literature would imply an essential role for truth. Denying that argument, Lamarque sees, however, genre conventions in these cases of falsehood implied in literature or, in other words, "Factual accuracy is a convention of the genres mentioned" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 131). Although Lamarque does not add further justifications, Aristotle in his *Poetics* can help him, pointing out, first, the fallacy described in subject-level of the *Odyssey* when Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus by seeing a scar just above his knee (*Poetics*, 1451a 25), and second, the no problematic picture of a hind with horns (*Poetics*, 1460 b 30). Poets can ignore the anatomy of hinds and make logical mistakes, but any of these epistemic problems affect the aesthetic qualities of their works. If truth has a role in literature, it is not a necessary one. What can be considered true in fiction depends on genre conventions and, above all, the opaque structure of a work, as we will see later.

According to the second Lamarquean argument, if truth has any role in literature, literary texts will necessarily contain then factual statements, which can be evaluated by truth. However, the interesting statements of the greatest novels are not true or false propositions but speculative ones. *Crime and Punishment* offers many monologues in which Raskolnikov speculatively entertains himself, for example, thinking about the frequent failures of intended perfect crimes (Dostoevsky, 1989, pp. 60-61). Therefore, according to Lamarque, literature cannot be interpreted and appreciated by truth because many literary works would be not true or false but epistemically vacuous. Thus, given that epistemic vacuity, even masterpieces could be considered merely trivial. That seems to be absurd or, at least, counterintuitive. However, against the epistemic and literary triviality of literature, a third argument infers that every apparent world-conception implied in a literary work entails an engagement by the critics with that world-conception. Pro-truth theorists affirm then that literature is not vacuous because those stocks of speculative propositions denote the world conceptions of the authors or the

critics. For Lamarque, however, neither the literary pieces nor the literary criticisms are the author's or critics' beliefs. An author does not necessarily accept all that is said by their characters; even more, a thematic identification by a literary critic does not imply a tacit engagement with the identified thematics.

These three arguments do not presuppose the concept of narrative opacity. It is possible to defend each of them without introducing any intensional content of it. However, the fourth – and final – argument indeed presupposes the narrative opacity. It is attacking the *so-called quotation industry*. Thus, that fourth argument is not logically stronger than the earlier three because the narrative opacity is introduced as an alternative response to what is demolished by attacking the pro-truth theorists, e.g., the specific literary interpretation and appreciation of literature. Thus, arguing against the quotation industry already implies those concepts to which Lamarque pretends to arrive. To sum up, according to him, literary texts cannot be reduced to quotes because every quote is a simple abstraction from the *clusters* in which every single literary sentence is embedded. Thus, let us begin by briefly introducing the concept of narrative opacity.

As an alternative response to the above question, Peter Lamarque (1981, 2014) and Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (1994) offers two important theoretical resources: 1) what Lamarque calls, thanks to Noël Carroll, "thought theory" and 2) the concept of narrative opacity essentially defined by the principle of "salva fictione." For this last principle, the authors mean that "story-identity is not preserved under some substitutions of co-referential singular terms in fictive utterances" (Lamarque & Olsen, 1994, p. 81), which signifies, appealing to an example, that any sentence as "Holmes returned to London" cannot be substituted by, let us say, "Holmes returned to Smoke" (ibid.). Thus, a sentence's "sense or connotation" (ibid.) is the most relevant *dimension* of fictive utterances whose regency is not truth. Why could connotation be almost an essential dimension of fictive utterances? That first theoretical resource is the answer we are looking for: the concept of thought-cluster, implied by the thought theory, entails, for its part two contents. First, according to thought theory, keeping something in mind does not necessarily imply believing that something. That is, in fact, a primary response to the paradox of fiction because fictive utterances are the kind utterances candidate to mind something without believing or, in other words, entertaining "a thought without being disposed to assert its content as a world-directed truth" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 142). Second, it is not one and only one sentence the cause of "significant emotional reactions" but an entire intertwined

structure (*clusters*) of thoughts. In that sense, narrative opacity consists of the impossibility of substituting fictive sentences by others because of the dependence of their sense on a global semantic structure. It is obvious now why Lamarque criticizes the quotation industry: every quote actually is an isolated thought from a global, particular semantic structure. Thus, the literary sense of a sentence is determined by its particular connection with many others. Finally, narrative opacity is not dependent on truth or strictly asserting a sentence. Thus, each of the three above arguments against the pro-truth theorists does not affect the concept of narrative opacity.

However, a problem arises: if truth has no role in the literary, narrative opacity, are the possible cognitive benefits of literature merely contingent? The four counterarguments by Lamarque attack any possibility to accept a role for propositional truth in the literary reading, but they do not imply any attack on any other conception of knowledge. The only worthy argument is the following one: "if this is not the standard kind of truth with a time-honoured connection to knowledge, then literature can seem a poor relation in the battle for ideas" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 127) or, in other words, "If literary truth is too remote from philosophical (or scientific) truth, then literature cannot seem to compete for the high-ground of truth to which human cognition aspires" (ibid.). Unlike Lamarque, many contemporary philosophers defend the distinction between art and science, defending, for its part, a propositional conception of truth, but without denying cognoscitive powers to art. If it were possible to defend another kind of cognoscitive experience, it would stay open the possibility of finding cognoscitive powers in the own concept of narrative opacity.

### **3. Althusserian Aesthetics**

Louis Althusser's Aesthetics is a good candidate to satisfy the above conditions, e.g., defending the cognitive value of literature as well as denying alternative conceptions of truth. In other words, the Althusserian aesthetic approach to literature admits cognitive benefits in literary works without adhering to a non-propositional theory of truth.

In a letter originally published in the French journal *La Nouvelle Critique*, Althusser responded to a previous publication by André Daspre on the relationships between art and knowledge (Althusser, 1966). That relationship is one of the most discussed problems among contemporary Marxist aestheticians because it is implied in the larger debate on literature and

ideology. The thesis, according to which literature is a mirrored *image* of the actual reality as well as its antithesis, e.g., literature is no other thing than an inverted reality, presupposes a direct link between literature and knowledge. Against these called *vulgar* Marxist positions (Eagleton, 2002, p. 13), Althusser opposed a strict distinction between art and science. For him, likewise science, literature can deal with the vital experiences of an individual (Althusser, 1966, p. 142). Thus, the possible objects of literature and knowledge are, in fact, the same. However, literature does not pretend to explain its objects or, in other words, it does not pretend to explicit "conclusions" from "premises" or even remedy the effects of ideology on individual experiences (Althusser, 1966, p. 143). What literature pretends to be, according to Althusser, is to make us "see" the ideology from and in which the literary pieces emerge and are immersed (ibid.). "see" does not mean, however, literally *see* but feeling and generally perceiving the ideological stuff which constitutes the literary works.

Although the concept of *ideology* is extremely polysemic and disputed, I think theoretical resources from contemporary cognitive sciences can elucidate that thesis held by Althusser. In the next section, I will simply suggest some ideas to give a response to that problem. For the moment, however, I only offer some remarks departing from the Althusserian ideas. Firstly, scientific knowledge implies logical relationships that *explain* phenomena. Thus, the Althusserian Aesthetics of literature does not pretend to substitute a traditional conception of knowledge for a more esoteric one. Secondly, perceiving or – and – feeling ideology implies a cognoscitive experience irreducible to that traditional conception of knowledge whose regencies are consistency and truth. However, because of the essential role of that *feeling* in elucidating the cognoscitive experience of literature, it becomes necessary to explore it more deeply. Strictly speaking, literary works do not constitute any form of scientific knowledge because they do not pretend to explain anything. Assuming a polemical equation between knowledge and empirical knowledge, denying the empirical knowledge character to literature makes all sense. However, can we accept other forms of knowledge?

According to Hilary Putnam, that question has an affirmative answer since literature is a form of *conceptual knowledge*. Curiously, Peter Lamarque quotes a passage from a text where Putnam talks about literature but omits the Putnamean distinction between empirical and conceptual knowledge. Lamarque quotes Putnam in order to support his thesis on the irrelevance of truth and falsity to literary value (Lamarque, 2014, p. 136), but he leaves out that essential distinction postulated by Putnam, viz., between empirical and conceptual knowledge.

According to Putnam, "for being aware of a new interpretation of the facts, however repellent, of a construction that can [...] be put upon the facts, however perversely – is a kind of knowledge. It is knowledge of a possibility" (Putnam, 2010, pp. 89-90). However, my first attempt to elucidate the Althusserian use of *perceiving* by appealing to Putnam would not be accepted by Lamarque. Literary works can be constituted by sentences describing real or possible facts; that is fine. However, our literary disposition while reading literature as literature allows itself to play in such a way that no matter the sentences are – real or possible – the text turns opaque. The narrative opacity thesis implies not only the irrelevance of truth in literary value, but it also eliminates the possibility of abstracting any transparent conceptual knowledge such as that entailed in a possible world conception described in fictional works. As I merely suggested above, the thematic level of a literary work does not make sense in literary reading because the opacity inhibits the so-called "stability." According to Lamarque, "Beliefs formed about characters, attitudes, values, and meanings are much less secure and, being subject to hypothesis, supposition, and interpretation, are always liable for revision" (Lamarque, 2014, p. 148). Thus, abstracting conceptual knowledge from literary pieces seems incompatible with a strong engagement with an opaque reading of a literary text. Therefore, a Putnamean elucidation of Althusser is destined for failure.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest an alternative response to our problem. An unconnected debate to our own discussion could be the key to postulating more sounded answers to our questions. In the following section, I will introduce some ideas departing from the famous *Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka* ("Notes on Kafka") by Theodor W. Adorno and the critical interpretation offered by Maeve Cooke (2014).

#### **4. A Kafkian Opacity**

In 1953 Theodor W. Adorno published his "Notes on Kafka," a long and complex essay constituted of nine sections on Franz Kafka's literature. Although the *Notes* have received a lot of academic attention, I would like to emphasize, however, the philosophical problems set out by Adorno on the nature of literary interpretation, which will help us to take some distance from a vulgar Marxist absorption into those theses on the mirroring powers of literature. His aim in the *Notes* is dependent on the explicit target of his critiques, e.g., the existentialist

approaches to Kafka's literature. "Existentialist," however, does not extensionally mean all the familiar doctrines by Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Wahl, Jaspers, or even Camus, but, as Margarete Kohlenbach (2010) points out, that one held by Hans-Joachim Schoeps, an active literary critique who collaborated with Max Brod in editing some Kafka's works (Rubin, 2015). Thus, Adorno aimed to discuss a specific kind of interpretation of literature, which had its model in those forms of theological existentialism. Particularly, Adorno aimed to discuss the literary procedure according to which fictional information is collapsed into thematic non-fictional information. In other words, Adorno criticized the reduction of the subject level of a piece to its thematic level or even, in Lamarquean words, turn the opacity out to transparency. Thus, for Adorno, the objective of his essay is to oppose a *riddle (Rätsel)* to "a bitterly serious Kafka" (Adorno, 1986, p. 284)<sup>52</sup>. Although the word *Rätsel* has many senses from Adorno's Aesthetics, one of them is quite relevant for this context: the works of art are riddles for people who do not have a muse (Adorno, 1970, p. 183). The lack of muse then has all to do with the lack of imagination or disposition to play with imagination. A "bitterly serious Kafka" destroys the possibility of reading Kafka's works without reducing it to a set of transparent doctrinal thoughts. On the contrary, "the insistence on the riddle" (ibid.) is for Adorno an opportunity to argue against any transparent reduction. As an example, Adorno mentions the attempts to reduce Kafka to doctrinal thoughts such as "men have lost their well-being, their way to the absolute is blocked, their life is dark or confusing or even, as they say, today, they are obligated to, and remain in, the nothingness, taking care of their duties modestly and hopeless" (Adorno, 1986, p. 254). What we would learn from Kafka is, in fact, the mirror of a doctrine already known. In order to discuss these reductive attempts, Adorno introduces six interesting and sound arguments.

The first argument is the following: 1) by hypothesis, let us assume that Kafka's literature has a hidden message; 2) by a second hypothesis, let us assume that a philosophical doctrine can transparently give an account of that hidden message; 3) there is no one interpretation of Kafka's literature, but many; 4) from these previous steps, it follows a disjunction: i) all those interpretations are brutally trivial because they are trying to find senses that are clearly established in philosophical texts or ii) those diverse interpretations are actually a problem for the second hypothesis; 5) given the lack of consensus among the critics, it seems

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<sup>52</sup> All translations from German are mine.

that (i) makes no sense. Therefore, if it is true that Kafka's literature hides a message, there is no philosophical doctrine that can transparently reduce its many senses. The second argument is equally interesting, and its structure, for its part, is a *reductio ad absurdum*. Its premises are: 1) by hypothesis, let us assume that Kafka wanted to communicate all those sets of philosophical slogans; 2) given that we needed tons of books and papers to explain the philosophical enigmas, 3) Kafka wasted a lot of time in trying to communicate simple ideas through complex resources and 4) he awkwardly failed into the task of communicating the intended philosophical ideas. Therefore, considering these absurd inferences, it seems reasonable to abandon the first hypothesis. The third argument is a counterargument because Adorno offers a response to an objection. It could be said that Kafka did not expressly communicate his ideas; rather, he appealed to symbolic communication. Adorno, however, responds that symbolic or not, it is not possible to systematize – or unify – the various senses contained in Kafka's works. The fourth argument, for the first time, hypothetically concedes a thesis from the opponent: 1) maybe some aphorisms written by Kafka can grasp some senses present in *The trial* and *The Castle*, however, 2) if it exists connections between prose and literature in Kafka, these connections should apply to every Kafka's literary work. Nevertheless, that is not the case. According to Adorno, tales like "The bucket rider" are not reducible to simple formulae. The last two arguments, however, are less clear than the earlier fourth. The fifth argument is against a possible objection: accepting the earlier arguments, one can argue the ignorance of Kafka in his own work. Adorno reasonably responds that the author's intentions cannot reduce the meaning of a work. Finally, Adorno saw an incompatibility between attributing one and only one transparent sense to a literary work and the historical changes experimented by the interpretations of a work.

Once the counter-arguments have been raised, an obvious question emerges: what kind of interpretation Kafka deserves? According to Adorno, a *mimetic* one. Reading Kafka is not a compulsive hunting of symbols but a mimetic encounter with the characters. Apparent irrelevant gestures are, for Adorno, on the contrary, very relevant for interpreting literary works. For example, Adorno considered the "old woman" perturbing gaze at the very beginning in *The Trial*. Connecting with that uncanny gesture allows us to open another text dimension, e.g., the psychological one. However, several authors do not agree with the Adornian treatment of literature.

Maeve Cooke, for example, recognizes the value of the Adornian reflections for the

debate on the theoretical limits of Jürgen Habermas' communicative ethics but denies the Adornian emphasis on gesture over concepts in literary interpretation. In her reading of Adorno, Cooke argues that the Adornian concept of *gesture* merely intends a pre-linguistic affective capacity, putting aside any conceptual or propositional content. This engagement with the affective predominance defeats all possible attempts to gain any cognitive benefit from Kafka's literature. An overemphasis on gestures, according to Cooke, does not allow us to live perhaps the most valuable literary powers of Kafka's works. Departing from an interpretation of "In the penal colony" by Kafka, Cooke argues that the possibilities of the polysemic character of Kafka's literature allows for an ethical significance emerging from the story but not as "something that is readily available to them, but rather something they have to work out for themselves in reasoning processes with others" (Cooke, 2014, p. 638) or, in other words:

Kafka's story intensifies our affective response to it: it denies us the comfort of a stable intellectual framework within which our feelings of horror, distress and so on could be interpreted and subjected to rational control; nevertheless [...] it does not prevent us from engaging rationally with the question of its justice/injustice (Cooke, 2014, pp. 638-639)

Therefore, our concepts are submitted to the opaqueness of Kafka's stories. By disturbing that stability, narrative opacity produces a feeling of strangeness in front of our conceptual frameworks. In that sense, Adorno's arguments against a serious Kafka are an instance of the Lamarquean arguments against the pro-truth theorists. Moreover, both philosophers have good reasons for defending Kafka's opacity over the theoretical attempts to reduce his work to philosophical doctrines. When we read Kafka's works, we use a complex cluster of profile and domain concepts to comprehend what is written. The reading process entailed in fiction is not quite different from that one entailed in non-fictional texts because the works require our everyday concepts but the works, for its part, organize our conceptual clusters in such a way that they are turned opaque. Particularly in Kafka's literature, our familiar concepts are obliged to absurd connections, which are utterly possible to us. *The metamorphosis* contains extraordinary passages when the absurd is subtly set as secondary information:

But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven; to catch that, he would have to hurry at a frantic speed, and his collection of samples wasn't packed yet, and he certainly didn't feel particularly fresh and lively himself. And even if he managed to catch the train, he couldn't escape

a dressing-down from the boss, for the attendant from work had been waiting at the five-o'clock train, and had long ago informed the boss that Gregor had missed it (Kafka, 2009, p. 30)

Gregor Samsa "found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin" (Kafka, 2009, p. 29), but his concerns are losing the trains and, finally, a possible "dressing-down from the boss." All the horror we can feel at the story's beginning subtly turns into an absurd situation constituted of a vermin man and his concerns regarding his job. Once again, from the quotidian concepts emerge possible absurd situations. As Cooke remarks, Kafka does not say anything *straightforwardly*, but it does not mean that the narrative opacity of his works cannot convey deep cognoscitive experiences. On the contrary, the specific way through which his prose produces cognitive benefits is precisely its narrative opacity.

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