Proceedings of the
European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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Literary Realism and the Significance of Life

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ABSTRACT. Since the advent of modernity, and particularly Kant, the interpretation of art as mimetic has been mostly rejected such that the prevailing position in contemporary aesthetics is that the artwork should be understood as its own autonomous world, unrelated to "real life," at least in any significant cognitive sense. In fact, skeptics charge that the search in literature for cognitive value – i.e., what might be considered truth or knowledge of life – is a category mistake. They argue such an inquiry requires an attitudinal shift *toward* the actual world and so *away* from the world of the artwork, which has its own intrinsic values, ones determined not mimetically according to pre-established laws of reality, but rather flexibly and thematically according to its own autonomous, internal values. In contrast, the position put forth here argues for a strong cognitive connection between literature and life by centering upon the faculty of imagination in its capacity to be both an inventive power, demonstrated through literary creation, and a truth-disclosing power, insofar as it reveals something "essential" concerning the human condition or, as it will be called, the *human situation*. It is argued that frequently debates in aesthetic theory draw too sharp a line between art as mimesis (imitation) and art as production (invention). Defenders of this sharp line typically approach the concept of mimesis with an overly Platonic prejudice that distorts an adequate understanding of the notion. An Aristotelian reconstruction or retrieval of mimesis will be presented, specifically as it relates to imagination (*phantasia*) and understanding (*sunesis).* These concepts will be developed in

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dialogue with recent thinkers, particularly Martha Nussbaum and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

1. Introduction

The problem of the relation between literature and life has been around since Plato, who rid his ideal republic of poetry since what the poets provide, ontologically, is merely an imitation of an imitation, that is, a pictorial image twice removed from reality. Since the modern period, and particularly Kant, the interpretation of art as mimetic has been mostly rejected such that the prevailing position in contemporary aesthetics is that the artwork should be understood as its own autonomous world, unrelated to "real life," at least in any significant cognitive sense. In fact, skeptics charge that the search in literature for cognitive value – i.e., what might be considered truth or knowledge of life – is a category mistake. They argue such an inquiry requires an attitudinal shift *toward* the actual world and so *away* from the world of the artwork, which has its own intrinsic values, ones determined not mimetically according to pre-established laws of reality, but rather flexibly and thematically according to its own autonomous, internal values.

Recently, however, attempts have been made to reconceive the concept of mimesis as it relates to art. Frequently these reinterpretations, however, do not conceive of mimesis in the strong cognitive sense in terms of some form of truth or knowledge.[2] Moreover, there have also been attempts to rethink the faculty of imagination and its connection to life,

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[2] See, for example, Walton 1990 and Lamarque and Olsen 1994.

particularly in regard to its ethical or practical import. These interpretations likewise vary concerning the degree of strength or adequacy of the cognitive impact of imaginative literature.[3] But despite the prevailing theoretical position in contemporary aesthetics, which views art as primarily productive and so free from the laws of life, there persists the humanist intuition that literature, and specifically literary realism, remains very much related to life. For many (if not most) readers continue, like David Copperfield, to "read for life."[4] Or, as John Gibson puts it, "literature presents the reader with an intimate and intellectually significant engagement with social and cultural reality."[5] The question remains, though, how precisely to establish the connection between literature and life, that is, how to explain the cognitive link between the imaginative realm as an invented or created world and the ethically relevant real world of flesh and blood human beings.

Although many significant philosophical problems arise concerning the nature of literature and fiction, for my purposes here I will not examine in any detail such questions as what constitutes such concepts as "literature" or "fiction." Rather, I will assume a more or less common understanding of these terms as they relate to serious works of the imagination, works which typically refer to novels, short stories, dramas, and some poetry (such as epic poetry). Likewise, I will not worry over which texts to include in this category of "serious" but will assume that at least some fictional works are recognizable as such (e.g., *Hamlet*, *Middlemarch*, *A Doll's House*, *Crime*

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[3] Nussbaum 1990, pp. 54-105, Gaut 2009, pp. 115-126, Currie 2009, pp. 209-221, and Currie 1998, pp. 161-181.

[4] Nussbaum 1990, pp. 230-244.

[5] Gibson 2007, p. 2.

and Punishment, etc.).

As mentioned above, the problem of the cognitive relation between literature and life is an old one that goes back as far as Plato: how can an imaginative literary text, particularly insofar as it is admittedly *fictional*, manifest some form of truth or knowledge regarding life, reality, the world, or ourselves? Of course, almost everyone admits fictional works can and often do contain truthful propositions, be they historical, geographical, scientific, philosophical and so forth. However, the much more difficult problem is to explain in what sense a text *insofar as it is fictional* can provides a kind of truth or knowledge. Aristotle, in his response to Plato's critique that poetry is a deviation (twice removed) from reality and truth,[6] does not downplay the role of the creative imagination in the poetic work. Rather Aristotle considers the fictional status of poetic drama as precisely that principle which provides universality such that fictional works are elevated above historical or merely factual works, texts that are less serious because they offer a lower or more contingent form of truth.[7] But if this is the case, the burden is placed upon the cognitivist to explain just how a literary work can convey truth and knowledge *through* – rather than *despite* – its fictional status. Moreover, in doing so, the cognitivist must defend why the capacity to impart truth is not some "add-on" but rather should be considered part of a literary text's overall aesthetic or literary value. Finally, the problem is pushed further still by what John Gibson calls the textual constraint.[8] For it is not sufficient for cognitivists to claim that literary

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[6] Plato 1941, *Republic,* Bk. X.

[7] Aristotle 1941, *Poetics*, Ch. 9.

[8]See Gibson 2007, pp. 5-9.

fiction leads to knowledge insofar as the reader applies aspects derived from fiction to the real world. For skeptics frequently concede as much. Rather the stronger cognitivist position must show how the text itself does the work in revealing or demonstrating to the reader whatever cognitive significance (i.e., truth or knowledge) is contained therein.

The position put forth here argues for the strong cognitive connection between literature and life by centering upon the faculty of imagination in its capacity to be both an inventive power, demonstrated through literary creation, and a truth-disclosing power, insofar as it reveals something "essential" concerning the human condition or, as I call it, the *human situation*. Frequently debates in aesthetic theory draw too sharp a line between art as mimesis (imitation) and art as production (invention). Defenders of this sharp line typically approach the concept of mimesis with an overly Platonic prejudice that distorts an adequate understanding of the notion. In contrast, an Aristotelian reconstruction or retrieval of mimesis will be presented, specifically as it relates to imagination (*phantasia*) and understanding (*sunesis).* These Aristotelian concepts will be developed in dialogue with recent thinkers, particularly Martha Nussbaum and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

2. Background Aristotelian Principles

To begin let me identify, without defending here, some of the Aristotelian principles that form the scaffolding of my approach. First, like many literary cognitivists, I hold that the cognitive value of fictional realism is a kind of ethical knowledge. It is important to note, however, that Aristotle and

indeed the classical tradition consider the ethical sphere to be much broader than the modern, narrower construal of morality, since for the Ancients the essential ethical question is "how we are to live."[9] This more holistic and eudaimonistic approach to ethics does not isolate individual actions and analyze their legitimacy merely according to abstract principles or a rigid methodology. Rather, the Aristotelian approach to ethics recognizes that particular actions, though measured to some extent by universal principles, cannot be entirely divorced from the agents (i.e., characters) as well as from the particular aspects of the concrete situation. In fact, this ethical knowledge can be conceived as a *situational knowledge*, one that is distinct from a scientific or philosophical knowledge of abstract natures, principles or theorems.

Secondly, given the claim that ethical knowledge is a kind of situational knowledge, the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) and practical knowledge (*phronêsis*) is significant. For the latter kind of knowledge involves concrete perception of particulars (*aísthēsis*) as a constituent part of its cognition. Aristotle makes the distinction in response to the problem of *akrasia* and the insufficiency of the overly rationalistic Platonic tradition which holds that knowledge of the universal is sufficient for the cultivation of practical wisdom. In opposition to this, Aristotle recognizes that while the theoretician may well hold adequate propositional knowledge of ethical concepts and principles, she all too frequently fails to act ethically in concrete situations. The question is: why? Aristotle acknowledges that at times this failure can be attributed either to an ignorance of the universal or to a weakness of will that

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[9] Nussbaum 1990, pp. 3-52.

succumbs to the temptation of powerful appetites or passions that rule over reason, which, in turn, leads to the formation of a corrupt character. In both cases, however, the ethical failure can be attributed, in some respect, to theoretical reason: either ignorance of the universal or a failure to instantiate the theoretical principle in the concrete situation. Significantly, in the modern context, both deontologists and utilitarians would agree, it seems, to this general way of construing ethical failure. Virtue ethicists, however, hold that such failures are frequently caused by another kind of epistemic oversight or cognitive deficiency. This cognitive deficiency is due not to ignorance of abstract concepts and universal principles or to the incapacity to articulate the concepts and principles in logical, propositional form; nor is the deficiency necessarily due to one ignoring or refusing the dictates or maxims of rational analysis. Rather, there exists another possibility for the cognitive deficiency, namely, an incapacity to understand or "read" the particulars presented in the specific situation in an adequate manner. Hence, in this case, the ethical oversight or failure is attributable not to abstract reason but to concrete perception.

Thirdly, the distinction between the two modes of reasonings (theoretical and practical) is also determined by the distinct objects or ends toward which reason is directed. The object of theoretical reason is a general knowledge for its own sake (the conclusion of the theoretical syllogism). The object of practical reason is a concrete decision and in turn a specific action (the conclusion of the practical syllogism). Given this distinction, it follows that the difference in objects is what determines the distinct intentional sphere toward which reason is primarily directed in its cognitive activity. Therefore, we can say the primary sphere or focus of theoretical

reason is the universal. Particulars are typically involved in theoretical reasoning but in service to the universal (as instantiations or empirical evidence, for example). Likewise, universals (as major premises) are involved in practical reason but in service to the particular. So, in practical reasoning, there is a priority of the particular (over the universal).[10] In other words, it is not knowledge *of* the universal that is ultimately sought for in the practical sphere but rather the application of the universal *to* the specific situation. This requires adequate perception of particulars in the concrete situation.

Fourthly, this adequate perception of particulars within the intentional mode of the practical attitude involves imagination and the emotions in a way the theoretical attitude does not. However, for Aristotle, the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*) is not primarily the capacity to create new images, as in modern aesthetic theory; rather *phantasia* is, more originally, the power to perceive and in turn select the relevant and often subtle aspects of concrete particulars (*aísthēsis*). The two capacities are related of course, but here the realist dimension of Aristotle's philosophical psychology comes to the fore. As Nussbaum states, "Aristotle's emphasis is upon [imagination's] selective and discriminatory character rather than upon its capability for free fantasy. Its job is more to focus on reality that to create unreality."[11] A *phronisimos* or practically wise person, therefore, must possess an acute and vivid imagination insofar as she adequately perceives the subtle nuances of a complex situation that enables her to read the situation appropriately. In other words, it is not merely the ability to interpret the signs appropriately,

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[10] Nussbaum 1990, pp. 66-75.

[11] Ibid, 75.

though this is obviously required. One must first *see* the signs. Such seeing requires an alert sensitivity to particulars both in themselves and in relation to one another. Moreover, the ability to envision or imagine possibilities for the future cannot be divorced from an adequate grasp or perception of particulars, both present and past.[12]

Finally, the perception of particulars as concrete cognition involves emotions in a way not required by theoretical cognition. For, in practical reasoning, emotional responsiveness is not detached from, let alone a detriment to, rational cognition. Rather emotional responsiveness is intimately and necessarily connected to ethical discernment. As Nussbaum puts it,

> Good perception is a full recognition or acknowledgement of the nature of the practical situation; the whole personality sees it for what it is. The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say, in addition, that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person doesn't really, or doesn't fully, see what has happened, doesn't recognize it in a full-blooded way or take it in. We want to say that she is merely saying the words. "He needs my help," or "she is dead," but really doesn't yet fully know it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking.[13]

As Nussbaum points out, without the proper emotional response, one cannot

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[12] Currie 2009, pp. 209-221.

[13] Nussbaum 1990, 79.

be said to truly know what has happened. That is, one does not adequately grasp or understand the situation. For the appropriate emotional response to a given concrete situation is both a sign *of* understanding as well as a means *to* understanding. The appropriate emotional response to a loved one's death is not only a sign that the bereaved truly knows the loved one has died; the emotion is also that which reveals to the bereaved the truth that the loved one has died. Therefore, the imaginative, emotional, and cognitive elements are distinct, constituent features intimately integrated within the unified act of understanding (the situation).

3. Understanding (*Sunesis*)

Although the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) and practical knowledge (*phronêsis*) is well known, what has been less discussed is Aristotle's account of understanding (*sunesis*). In the previous section, we noted some important distinctions between practical reason and theoretical reason. What is interesting about the intellectual virtue of understanding is that Aristotle characterizes it as a kind of hybrid virtue that involves aspects of theoretical reason and practical reason, while remaining distinct from both kinds of reasoning. First, Aristotle points out that understanding (like practical knowledge) is directed toward the concrete realm of particulars. For the intentional sphere of reason in its cognitive activity is contextual or situational rather than general or universal. In Book VI, Chapter 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states, "For understanding (*sunesis*) is neither about things that are always and are unchangeable, nor about any and every one of the things that come into

being, but about things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation. Hence, it is about the same objects as practical wisdom" (1143a5-8).[14] Earlier in Bk. VI, Aristotle defines practical wisdom (*phronêsis)* as the ability "to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself" and "what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (1140a26-28). The intentional sphere, then, that both practical knowledge (*phronêsis*) and understanding (*sunesis*) share is the concern for the good life or "how a human being should live."[15]

At the same time, the object or end of understanding is not decision and concrete action. Rather, its end (like theoretical reason) is *learning*. Hence, its object is a kind of knowledge for its own sake. As Aristotle puts it, "(B)ut understanding and practical wisdom are not the same. For practical wisdom issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding only judges" (1143a8-10). There is a difference, then, between: (a) the practical knowledge (*phronêsis*) of what should be done in response to a particular situation and (b) an understanding (*sunesis*) of the situation itself. Aristotle goes on to say,

> Now understanding is neither the having nor the acquiring of practical
> wisdom; but as learning is called understanding when it means the
> exercise of the faculty of knowledge, so "understanding" is applicable
> to the exercise of the faculty of opinion for the purpose of judging of
> what someone else says about matters with which practical wisdom is
> concerned – and of judging soundly; for "well" and "soundly" are the

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[14] Aristotle 1941.

[15] Nussbaum 1990, p. 25.

same thing. And to be of "good understanding," viz. from the application of the word to the grasping of scientific truth; for we often call such grasping understanding (1143a11-19).

A few points can be made in light of this passage. First, in judging about "matters with which practical wisdom is concerned," understanding exercises the faculty of opinion (*doxa)* because the truths of the ethical domain (concerning how human beings should live) cannot be demonstrated with the logical rigor of other modes of inquiry (such as mathematics, physics, metaphysics). At the same time, Aristotle is not a relativist or subjectivist in that one can judge soundly such that good understanding is analogous to the grasping of scientific truth. We can say, therefore, what one understands is the truth(s) of the situation. Understanding the truth(s) of a situation means grasping all the nuances of the particulars and in turn measuring their significance in relation to other particulars and against the backdrop of universal principles and causes. Moreover, an acute imagination is a necessary constituent of understanding insofar as one must perceive (*aísthēsis*) the salient, subtle and significant aspects of the particulars of the situation. Also, like practical reason, understanding involves emotional responsiveness (e.g., sympathy) in a way that theoretical reason does not. Aristotle explains that the person of understanding is one who is sympathetic in her judgments. "This is shown by the fact that we say the equitable (person) is above all others a (person) of sympathetic judgment, and identify equity with sympathetic judgment about certain facts. And sympathetic judgment is judgment which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly; and correct judgment is that which judges

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what is true" (1143a22-24). As with practical knowledge, the correct judgment of a situation requires emotional openness and responsiveness without which one cannot be said to understand the situation and so grasp the contextual truth(s) contained therein.

Furthermore, understanding the truth(s) of a situation is ethical in the broad Aristotelian sense in that it holds practical value in learning how human beings should – or should not – live. The claim for such truths does imply a black and white moralism but rather suggests a continuum upon which slide appropriate and inappropriate actions, behaviors, responses, character formations, relationships, etc. In fact, such truths should be judged qualitatively according to standards of better and worse rather than right and wrong, as when we say X is a good action, person, relationship, rather than a right action, person, relationship, etc. Of course, there will be gray areas that require qualitative analysis and interpretation, but there are also lines that can be drawn and defended. Here we might recall Aristotle's analogy of how ethical discernment and in turn action aim at the bull's eye (doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way), which rarely, if ever, is achieved with perfect success. Nonetheless, a successful action, response, character or even overall life can be judged not by whether or not the arrow strikes the bull's eye but by whether the arrow hits the target or misses it entirely.

Finally, for Aristotle, modeling and imitation are necessary means to ethical knowledge in terms of instruction and learning. For what matters ethically is not merely *what* one does (the action) or even *why* one does it (the principle, rule, maxim, or motive) but also *how* one does it. The how is best learned through models and examples that illustrate and embody the

ways in which appropriate (or inappropriate) actions are performed, good characters and relationships are built (or destroyed), and overall successful lives are achieved (or not).

As concrete cognition that involves imagination, emotion, and reason, then, understanding (*sunesis*) can be considered an experiential knowledge or learning that one acquires through adequate perception and in turn judgment of human situations, one in which the truth (or more typically *truths*) of a situation is not easily articulated in generalized, propositional form. The reason is that often a hasty generalization too swiftly plucks a universal proposition from the contextual particulars thus reducing the supposed "truth" to a rather trivial or banal form. And yet, those who defend this kind of particularism seem to me to exaggerate too far in the other direction. For if we can learn from experience – and by "experience" I mean the concrete lived experience in which we sensitively, imaginatively, emotionally, and cognitively undergo or suffer a particular situation – then it seems there must be something within the experience that is sufficiently generalizable such that the experience (a) modifies our general views and (b) enables us to recognize something similar in other contexts to which we adjust our actions and behaviors accordingly. Such recognition, I suggest, involves a subtle attitudinal or modal shift in the perceiver's intentional relation to the situation. And here, a few modal distinctions might be made. Insofar as one perceives, examines, and analyzes a concrete situation primarily in terms of its particularity, one remains within a factual or historical modality; insofar as one analyzes the situation, or any of its aspects, as an instance or example of a generalized essence, formula, law, principle, etc. (be it scientific, psychological, philosophical and so forth),

one relates intentionally to the situation in a theoretical modality; insofar as one examines and engages the situation in order to respond or act upon it in some manner, one relates to it in a practical modality. But there is, I suggest, at least one other significant intentional mode in which to relate to the concrete situation, one that has, as it were, cognitive value. It is to identify or recognize the salient and significant features of the situation that render it as specific *type* or *kind* of situation (or action, feeling, character, etc.). For if in understanding a concrete situation we learn something regarding how human beings should – or should not – live, it means the particulars are not so particular they do not represent something beyond themselves as mere particulars. Rather they signify a *kind* of universality insofar as they offer insight into the broad ethical question of how human beings should or perhaps might live. Hence, in understanding, what we learn are situational or contextual truths. Such truths have a higher level of generality than factual or historical events considered strictly as factual, and yet a lower level of universality than scientific laws, logical principles, or mathematical theorems. For understanding of a situational truth evaluates particulars not as concrete factual entities (which make them unique) nor as entities subsumed under a universal category (as nature, essence). Rather it measures the value and significance of the particulars in relation to other particulars, *given the specific kind of situation*. For although the situation is complex and particular, it is not irreducibly complex or irreducibly particular. Rather, there are subtle yet recognizable patterns woven into the particulars. Hence, the truth that emerges relies upon an adequate perception of those relevant features of the situation, given the contextual and relational aspects. Hence, the intentional object of understanding is knowledge of

types or kinds – that is, knowledge of certain *types* of situation, *types* of character, *types* of action, behavior, responses, relationships, even overall lives.

If my account of situational or contextual truth holds, two related aspects emerge. One: narrative or dramatic performance (rather than propositional argument) is the best way to present, model, or *demonstrate* situational truths of various types or kinds. Two: fictional performance is better equipped than factual performance to disclose truths concerning these situational types or kinds. It is in this respect that we can recall Aristotle's famous statement regarding poetry as fictional drama:

> (T)he poet's task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which could occur, and are possible by the standards of probability or necessity. . . It is for this reason that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A 'universal' comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character – something which poetry aims at *despite* its addition of particular names (1451a36-1451b10).[16]

Here we can see that Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, considers the ontological status of poetry as fictional, as opposed to factual, to be a boon rather than a defect to the disclosure of the truths of types or kinds (of actions, situations, characters, lives). For there is a fictional "logic" that unfolds according to probability or necessity. Such probability or necessity is not measured

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[16] Emphases mine.

according to scientific (physical, behavioristic) laws of probability or mathematical necessity; rather it is *ethical* probability or necessity concerning how human beings live. Ethics, as Aristotle emphasizes, is all about characters, actions and feelings: that is, the way individuals act (behave, speak) and react (feel, emotionally respond) in accordance with their characters and the particulars of the specific situation.

3.1 Imitation (*Mimesis*)

The forgoing analysis leads us to the concept of mimesis. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies the origin of poetry as mimesis to two sources: namely, (1) the *delight* we find in imitation, and (2) what we *learn* from imitation (1148b4-15). Horace, of course, echoes Aristotle in his claim that the aims of literature are to please and to instruct. The aesthetic pleasure we receive from literature no one disputes. To claim we learn from literature, however, is to connect it to real life and so give literature its cognitive value. I argue that contemporary critics of the mimetic theory misunderstand Aristotle's notion of mimesis as it applies to fictional realism in two fundamental ways. The first pertains to the intentional *object* of imitation; the second to the intentional *mode* of imitation as fictional cognition.

First, one reason that mimesis has been much maligned is that the object of imitation or fictional representation is too frequently confused with the object of either: (a) factual/historical knowledge or (b) theoretical/scientific knowledge - both of which are the targets in Plato's critique. But what is represented in fictional realism is not what is empirically actual (a concrete particular), nor is it a mere instantiation or

exemplification of an already determined principle or proposition (an abstract universal). Rather, what is imitated are the *kinds* of things that human beings are capable of doing in certain *kinds* of situation, particularly ones enacted by certain *kinds* of character and in particular *kinds* of culture or society.

Secondly, in terms of the mode of fictional cognition, we must not think of imitation in the facile sense of verisimilitude of a copy to its original as if what is presented is a duplicate of the original. Here the analysis of mimesis offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer can be helpful. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that the cognitive significance of imitation lies in recognition (*anagnorisis*). What we recognize or discover within the artwork, however, is not something separate from the work itself, as though the represented content possesses a preestablished existence apart from the work. Gadamer states,

> (W)e do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we know already – i.e., what is familiar is recognized again. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something.[17]

This leaving out of what is contingent and variable to hone in on what is essential, Gadamer calls the "transformation into structure." The

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[17] Gadamer 1991, p. 114.

transformation into structure is an "independent and superior mode of being." So, "From this viewpoint 'reality' is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up (*Aughebung*) of this reality into its truth."[18] It is for this reason, then, "In imitating, one has to leave out and to heighten. Because he is pointing to something, [the artist] has to exaggerate, whether he likes it or not."[19] In other words, the leaving out, heightening, and exaggerating are all part of the license of the poetic realist as she moves, in her creative activity, not away from reality, but closer to it. Or rather, as Gadamer suggests, the poetic realist raises up reality insofar as she structures, shapes, and forms reality precisely by selecting, in her representation, only that which is essential. Through this selection, we recognize that which we previously only dimly perceived.

What, then, is the "thing" or "reality" whose "essence" is being revealed or recognized though the mimetic work? In an essay entitled "Art and Imitation," Gadamer provides an answer to this question. He states, "As the Aristotelian doctrine rightly seems to suggest, all art of whatever kind is a form of recognition that serves to deepen our knowledge of ourselves and thus our familiarity with the world as well."[20] Here Gadamer over-generalizes in his claim that all art (and by implication all literature) provides cognitive significance in the strong sense of the term. As I will discuss below, I do not think this is the case. Nonetheless, Gadamer's suggestion does shed light upon the problem of what precisely is known, i.e., the "real essence" or object that is imitated and in turn revealed through

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[18] Ibid., 113.

[19] Ibid., 115.

[20] Gadamer 1993, p. 100.

some works of literary fiction. He says what is known is *ourselves* and *our world*. Gadamer's phenomenological analysis of play (*Spiel*) explains that "self" and "world" should not be understood as separate substantive entities, but rather as participants or players in the game (of life).[21] Hence, what we grasp through literary fiction is not a knowledge of ourselves or the world as formal entities (i.e., substances or quiddities). Rather, what is revealed is ourselves *in relation to* the world, which means in relation to other people, our society or culture, and even ourselves. It is, in other words, an understanding of our *situation*.

3.2 Objections and Responses

Given this Aristotelian account of understanding (*sunesis*) and imitation (*mimesis*), let me conclude by identifying and responding to some skeptical objections frequently directed against a literary cognitivism that argues for the strong epistemic connection between literature and life.[22]

First, there is what Carroll calls the "common denominator argument."[23] This argument claims that what gives literature its value must be that which distinguishes literature as literature. Thus, literature's value is determined by those essential features which constitute literature and so must be exhibited by all works considered to be literature. Clearly there are

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[21] Gadamer 1991, Part I, Section 2.1.

[22] For convenience sake, I borrow from Noel Carroll's helpful classification of the first four objections. See Carroll 2007, pp. 24-42.

[23] Lamarque and Olsen are perhaps the most well-known defenders of this kind of objection. See Lamarque and Olsen 1994.

some works of literature that are not truth-disclosing. So, even if some literary works convey a kind of truth, the characteristic of disclosing truth is not a feature exhibited in all texts that we consider to be literature. Hence, the capacity to reveal truth is not a specific *literary* value. Rather, literary value must be broadened to something more inclusive, such as requiring imaginative engagement in regard to a text's formal elements or to be about a subject of interest in regard to its content or theme (its mimetic aspect). Hence, even if one's grants to literature the capacity to disclose truth, it is not its truth-disclosing function that provides the text's distinct literary or more broadly aesthetic value. In fact, this difference is what distinguishes literature from those modes of inquiry (such as history, science, philosophy) in which the truth-bearing function is a – if not *the* – constituent feature by which we judge the value of the given text.

Clearly it is the case that not all literary works are truth disclosing. What is less clear, however, is why the disclosure of a specific kind of truth, namely literary fictional truth, is not a constituent feature of a certain species of literature. As Carroll argues, the constituent features of a race car are distinct from those of a tractor, even if there are a more limited set of features that make both species valuable as motor vehicles.[24] An excellent race care possesses specific values that are not included within the broader set of values of a good motor vehicle (for example, the capacity to hold a turn at high speed). But it is according to the more specific set of values that we judge the worth of a good race car. Similarly, only literary texts within the specific genre that Carroll categorizes as "realist" should be evaluated according to this truth-bearing criterion. For at least some (and perhaps

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[24] Carroll 2007, p. 31.

many, if not most) literary works seem to aim (and the best ones manifest) the kind of situational understanding described above. Moreover, because literary or fictional truth as understanding has a distinct form (as sui generis), the extent to which a literary text exhibits this quality (with a degree of clarity, power, depth of insight, etc.) should be considered part of its overall aesthetic or literary value. As readers, we come to expect a realist novel that presents a complex situation to "bring home the goods," that is, to provide understanding of how and why this kind of event happened or this kind of character was formed, or this kind of relationship endured or fell apart, doing so in a way that neither simplifies nor trivializes the human situation. Moreover, highlighting a certain shade of ambiguity might be considered part of the content of our knowledge of ourselves and the human situation.[25] At any rate, such fictional truths are driven home only to the extent that we as readers are invested imaginatively and emotionally in the particulars as particulars, while, at the same time, recognizing the particulars as types that re-present possibilities for ourselves, thus revealing the truth(s) of our human situation.

Secondly, the banality argument claims that whenever the critic or general reader tries to articulate the truth revealed by a work of literary fiction, she inevitably is forced into stating the truth in a trivial or banal form. Stolnitz, for example, shows how the problem lies mainly in moving from the particular to the universal.[26] We praise Jane Austen not for her

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[25] For example, Dostoyevsky's fictional demonstration in *Notes from Underground* that 2 + 2 does not equal 4 when it comes to human beings. Dostoyevsky 2000.

[26] Stolnitz 1992, pp. 191-200.

disclosing to us the obvious and generalized truth that "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart"; rather we praise her work for rendering in fine and specific detail the characters of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy, among others, as they move about and interact in the particularities of time and place.[27] To reduce the complexity and delicacy of Austen's descriptive analysis of the particulars to a generalized truism does not deserve the title of knowledge or truth-revealing. In fact, such knowledge is what a reader must bring to the novel as a condition for recognizing the formal, thematic structure that unifies the text.

    This objection, I argue, oscillates between a too polarized dialectic of particularity on the one hand (e.g., historical or factual truth) and universality on the other (e.g., scientific or theoretical truth). However, the fictional truths disclosed are situational or contextual, such that a bald proposition or summary assertion of the "truth" can't help but sound reductive, trivial, and commonplace. Why? Because the constituent features that are involved in the distinct and specific literary cognition of fictional truths (namely, imaginative and emotional engagement) are precisely what is excluded in the abstract universal statement. It is, we might say, a distillation of the literary truth into a purely rational form. But when literary cognitivists (with a gesture toward Aristotle) speak of the "universal in the particular" or also "the concrete universal" what is intended, I think, is the disclosure of a truth of certain type or kind that can only be revealed through the narrative unfolding of the particular type of situation; it requires narrative or dramatic form that is revelatory of ourselves in relation to the world (others, society, etc.) under specific conditions. Although translation

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[27] Ibid., p. 194.

of the narrative into abstract concepts and propositions is possible, it does not occur without loss of full meaning. For, as we have seen, understanding (*sunesis*) is holistic. Indeed it is a cognition, but one that is not divorced from imaginative and emotional involvement as constituent features.

Thirdly, the no-expertise argument, which derives from Plato's *Ion*, holds that in the various branches of knowledge we expect the master of that discipline to be an expert in her field of study. But the literary writer, although an expert in her mastery of language and imaginative creativity of form and style, does not have a distinct subject matter about which she has mastered such that she be considered an expert in that field. Our only expectation is that she provides us with a story of interest, one in which she captivates and engages our creative imaginations.

My Aristotelian account of understanding (*sunesis*) argues that in which the fictional realist is an expert is *understanding the human situation*. Such expertise reveals a knowledge of human relations that includes various social, cultural, ethical, psychological, and even philosophical or religious aspects as they play out within lived experience. This understanding, as discussed earlier, is holistic insofar as it involves sensitive and imaginative perception, emotional response, rational analysis, ethical evaluation, and occasionally, perhaps, metaphysical insight. For the fictional realist is not only an expert in rendering particulars with a fine specificity and liveliness of imagination. She is likewise adept at revealing how gestures, tones, comments, actions and reactions *signify*. That is, she shows how these sensible signs disclose meaning, indeed ones that are often unintended consciously by the characters who exhibit them. The expert in the perception of human situations imaginatively evokes sensations that come

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alive, but also invests the sensible signs with symbolic significance such that they represent more than themselves as particulars; that is, they represent types which reveals ourselves and our situation under certain conditions. Moreover, in rendering types (of action, character, situation, etc.), the fictional text holds ethical import not by providing abstract rules or principles of how we *do* or *should* act, but by leading us to a sympathetic understanding of how we *might* act under such conditions. In this way, we learn from fictional situations that although only possible, rather than actual, are nonetheless *real possibilities of the human situation*, ones from which we can learn about ourselves and others – what we are capable of and perhaps, at times, how best to achieve or avoid certain types of actions, characters, or overall lives.

Fourthly, the no evidence argument, which is closely related to the no-expert argument, wonders how the one or two cases that a fictional writer explores (i.e., the particulars presented in the literary text) can be counted as evidence in support of a general conclusion about humankind or, as I have termed it, the human situation. Perhaps, at best, the literary text conveys the author's perspective, one that may very well be true, but nonetheless it does not qualify as knowledge, precisely because the perspective is not justified through sufficient evidence. This insufficiency of evidence is problematized further in fictional works, as opposed, say, to personal testimony, because what little evidence the fictional text provides (through exemplification) is intentionally non-factual. Hence, the concrete experiential "evidence" is admittedly distorted in order to imaginatively express, dramatize and unify the text's specific theme. But if this is the case, how can we distinguish

between genuine and putative knowledge?[28] On what basis do we qualify this author's perception as true knowledge and another author's as not? Cognitivists often employ concepts such as sincerity or authenticity, but critics deny these concepts are sufficiently strong to carry the weight required by the demands of knowledge.

Admittedly this is a difficult objection. In response, it can be pointed out that the assumption of this critique seems to be an interpretation of evidence based on the model of empirical science in which particulars are merely particulars such that research requires a certain amount of particulars to be amassed as quantified data in order to justify the general conclusion (thesis). In fictional realism, however, the universal is *in* the particular. That is, readers recognize and anticipate that fictional particulars represent more than themselves as individuals. Emotionally we are frequently moved by our imaginative identification with the particulars as particulars; at the same time, as spectators we analyze and evaluate the particulars and so cognitively learn about ourselves and the human situation insofar as the particulars are real possibilities for us. In this sense, fictional writing seems closely aligned with the descriptive analysis of phenomenology insofar as the power of persuasiveness often originates more from the fine rendering and in turn manifestation of our lived experience rather than from the amassing of quantifiable data or the logical rigor of analytic argumentation. Likewise, the affirmation we assent to in our reading of a literary text (the "yes, this is the way things are") is intuitive rather than analytic. Because the evidence provided in the rendering of particulars is experiential, the truth appeals intuitively to our lived experience. Frequently there are aspects of

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[28] Lamarque and Olsen 1994, p. 380.

our social situation or cultural experience that remain dark, vague and indistinct until they have been brought into the "light of day" by a clear and distinct expression. Those who demand that knowledge fulfill the requirements set by the methodology of empirical science might not be satisfied by this response, but it remains to be seen whether this is a flaw within a theory of literary cognitivism or the result of an epistemological prejudice, which itself is open to question.

Finally, there is what can be called the "closed world" or "pretense argument." This too is a formidable argument, which derives back to Frege and more recently to Searle.[29] This argument makes semantic distinctions between sense and reference, serious assertions and pretended assertions, horizontal conventions and vertical conventions, and so forth. The upshot is that in analyzing fiction, we find that although the sense or meanings of the words and concepts expressed in fictional propositions are the same as in factual propositions (for we have no difficulty in discerning their meaning according to ordinary usage), there is no real object (persons, places, states of affair) out there in the world to which the fictional assertions refer. Ontologically they are "airy nothings," imaginative objects that are merely self-referential within the fictional realm. Since these pretended assertions are intentionally non-deceptive, the normal commitments of illocutionary belief are suspended. When the actor on the stage screams "fire," the audience understands the term according to its ordinary usage, but within the aesthetic stance no one calls the fire department or 911. For when a play-goer or reader of fiction enters the closed world of make-believe, she merely entertains or imagines the world of play or pretense *as if* it were real,

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[29] Searle 1975, pp 319-332.

all the while suspending true belief. Given this attitude of make-believe, the issue of truth or knowledge has no place. In fact, to try to locate some truth about the real world in the literary performance is a kind of category mistake in that the spectator or reader must divert her attention away from the imaginative world of the text to the real world. In fact, whenever readers find statements within the fictional text that are true, they make these judgments based on knowledge attained through external sources (history, science, ordinary experience, etc.) rather than through the fictional text itself.

I have argued that the species of literature that can be called realism does not aim at disclosing factual or historical truths. Nor does it aim at disclosing truths of human nature that are so universal or general they can be baldly stated in propositional form without loss of full meaning. Rather they disclose understanding of various types of situation – how certain characters act (behave, speak) and react (feel, emotionally respond) in particular circumstances and under certain conditions. Although fictional worlds are only possible, or better yet potential, not actual, they unfold dramatically according to the real laws of human interaction and relationship. Hence, they unfold dramatically or narratively within the logic of probability (or plausibility) and at times, perhaps, necessity. Considered in comparison with history, the fictional statements are merely pretense. Considered in terms of real kinds of human situations and interactions, they are real, and so serious and revelatory. The problem with Searle's analysis is that he equates serious with non-fictional and pretense with fictional. This leads him to the problematic conclusion that "serious (i.e., non-fictional) speech acts can be conveyed by fictional texts, even though the conveyed

speech act is not represented in the text. Almost any important work of fiction conveys a 'message' or 'messages' which are conveyed *by* the text but are not *in* the text."[30]

To Searle's question of how a message is conveyed by the text but is not in the text, my suggestion is that although readers do not interpret a fictional realist text literally (i.e., factually or historically), they do interpret it seriously, that is, as representative or imitative of the kinds of things human beings do in certain situations; hence, they are our real possibilities. In this way, we learn from fictional situations about life – *real life*, which is not reducible to empirical, factual or historical existence. To understand ourselves and our world (i.e., our situation) it is not sufficient to know what has been done or what necessarily will be done (e.g., according to historical fact or to natural scientific laws). To understand fully ourselves and others we must also know what could be done, that is, what might happen under specific conditions. In this way, we better understand our situation and ourselves concerning how we might live.

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