

Philosophy and Literature: A Discussion on the Two Contiguous Facets of the Concept of 'Truth' About Knowledge

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The Philosophy 'of' Literature and the Philosophy 'in' Literature

I certainly feel myself to be in a perplexing condition of an angst given the fact that there already exists a sizeable oeuvre of writings on the philosophy of literature and a demonstration of such a relationship in varied literary and performative works and representations. Any attempt to begin a discussion on the very category of 'literature' is, more often than not, confounding since it has been looked at and approached in different ways that include conceptualizations like 'criticism', 'metacriticism', 'literary criticism', 'critical theory', 'critical philosophy', 'literary history', 'literary theory', 'poetics', 'hermeneutics' and so on. Again, literature has also been analysed from multifarious vantage points including those of the social, sometimes the sociological, the historical, the political, the cultural, the psychological, the psychoanalytical, the linguistic, the rhetorical and the stylistic. Now, the question is, how do we identify the 'philosophical' amidst the interplay of these approaches. Is it a question of a hidden essence or an issue of methodology? Or, in other words, is it essentially metaphysical or architecturally formalist? Beyond all the above-mentioned considerations, it, perhaps, implies an attempt to comprehend and grasp the nature of reality around us and, in this supreme task, literature serves to somewhat reify nature in all its possible manifestations. Whether we talk about science, history, the human mind and its functions, it is that intrinsic value that underlines everything.

Having said that, I would now try to look at the two distinctive categories here — the philosophy 'of'

literature and the philosophy 'in' literature. The evident prepositional interpolations are sometimes more baffling than what they seem to be in actuality, since they could have certain implications that are not only different, but also wholly oppositional. Philosophy 'in' literature would largely encapsulate the philosophical explorations that any good piece of literature is expected to allow, for instance, it is not difficult to identify strains of existentialism in the literature of Sartre and Camus, mysticism and, sometimes, disillusionment in Blake's poetry, pantheism and the worship of Mother Nature in Wordsworth's work, a philosophy of human destiny in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or a notion of divine providence and a celebration of eternal goodness in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and so on. On the other hand, when we speak of the other category, that is the philosophy 'of' literature, we usually mean the innate idea of universality that a creative piece of writing or, for that matter, any other imaginative form of representational art is grounded in or imbued with. It somewhat also entails a search for the 'ideal' through the 'reflectional'. As Albert William Levi, in his authoritative *Literature, Philosophy and the Imagination*, precisely puts it:

Speculation about the ideal has its own rules. Like empirical research, it strives after unification, although it lacks the discipline of the principles of experience. Nevertheless, says Lange [F. A. Lange], only in "creation" in the narrower sense of the word, in *poetry*, is the ground of reality consciously abandoned. In thought, form may have an edge over content, but in poetry it is completely dominant. "The poet in the free play of his spirit creates a world to his own liking, in order to impress more vividly upon the easily manageable material a form which has its own intrinsic value and its importance independently of the problems of knowledge."¹

In other words, a very important faculty of the mind, called 'intuition', is at work whereby the poet or, for that matter, any creative persona, brings his subjectivity to bear on this world of objects, that he seeks to give an expression to. Again, 'literary expression' demands a

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specialized faculty by which the objective of creative writing is achieved. It is, both semantically and stylistically, different from the 'expression' or the 'language' of other non-literary discourses. To put it simply, the former aims for a metaphysical perception of natural phenomena and the latter seeks to arrive at a materialistic understanding of the experience of man and the world. But, however dichotomous the standpoints may seem to be, it may admittedly be said that both endeavour to cognitively achieve not only a mere semanticity, that is often positivist, but also a significant point of ethicality, that is not only ideological but also irreducible, imperishable and universal appealing to the inner depths of humanity, whether through 'figurative representations of the entire truth'² or through positivistic experimentations of the material reality. The interesting note in this is that both entail imaginative freedom and epistemological formulations. Hence, when we are trying to identify the very idea of philosophicality in literature, in particular, we need to bear in mind the 'synthetic activity'³ that the authorial mind undertakes. Also important here is to take a cognizance of the fact of what Aristotle meant by his theory of the tragic 'catharsis'. As Levi quotes in this regard:

"The more freely synthesis exerts its function, the more aesthetic becomes the image of the world." The imagination turns even the shapelessness of fact and the uselessness of suffering into a world of art.⁴

We, therefore, may say that on the face of such apparent antinomies between scientific understanding and imaginative perception, both the 'cultures of the mind' entail anthropomorphic as well as anthropocentric conceptualizations about the universe along with a search for truth, and both 'breathe the atmosphere of mutuality, of a magnanimity which envisages science and literature as a kind of dual monarchy jointly sovereign for men's minds and sensibilities'.⁵

Truly contextual to the discussion so far would be to talk, not so much in profuse details though since that does not presently constitute the general objective of this project, about Kant's *Critique of Judgment* being in a conceptual disagreement with his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the latter work, Kant sounds to be paradoxically metaphysical when he claims a positivistic culmination of metaphysics itself, the feasibility of which is something that he himself is sceptical about. In the former, he envisages a 'logic of illusion', something that is starkly in contradistinction with 'pure reason'. While it is seldom possible to say whether Kant's formulations – concerning 'the scientific, the moral, and the poetic activities of the mind'⁶ not to be independent and non-identical functions – could be considered as an outré generalization or not, we have

to say that 'his general account of the imagination is too restricted, too confined in its position as a mere instrument in the service of scientific knowledge'.⁷ The expression 'judgment', perhaps, implies the only category by which a certain distinction between the realms of science and the literary arts can be discerned from the Kantian perspective. Two chief ideas that can get us somewhat closer, if not directly to the phenomenon of literature, but at least tangentially to the understanding and appreciation of literature and the arts, are 'pleasure' and 'purposiveness'. For Kant, 'intuition' was a very important idea since he felt that the 'purposiveness' of the world or, for that matter, nature originates from our 'Reflective Judgment'.⁸ This 'purposiveness' of nature, for him, was 'a transcendental principle of the faculty of Judgment'.⁹ Of course, this is an instance of the signatorial Kantian terminology since another conceptual equivalent would be 'the myth-making faculty' in man, as was envisaged by Bergson and Cassirer.

The apparent contradiction between the claims and postulates of scientific understanding and judgmental perception, the former trying to 'make a connected and unified experience out of our perceptions of nature'¹⁰ and the latter being about the power of 'Judgment' to read 'into nature' the same connections, leads to the antinomial objectivity-subjectivity supposition. What we derive from Kant, in this regard, is that the faculty of judgment lies deeply rooted in 'creative imagination' which is 'as worthy of respect as is the Understanding itself'.¹¹ Again, such imagination cannot be taken to perform a purely 'synthetic' function that seemingly leads to the unification of all perceptions, thereby constructing human experience from a cognitive stance. The formation of a structure of knowledge cannot only be brought about by cognition of the natural phenomena. Such cognitivism may lead to a scientific understanding of phenomena but may not be able to bring about an aesthetic conceptualization of nature and the world that potentially fosters in a moral awakening. In fact, it would not be proper to consider the first two Critiques, that is those of Pure Reason and Practical Reason, in separation from the third, that is that of Judgment, since the imagination on which the faculty of judgment rests is 'the capacity of a finite, discursive intelligence to work up the material of experience from its diverse elements into something which can be known or judged'.¹² It is an intrinsic human potentiality from which not only is judgment produced, but also is literature generated. Literature, therefore, is the resultant of that 'productive' imagination which is transcendental in nature. Though ideas are drawn from the world of nature, they are synthesized not only cognitively, but also, more significantly, imaginatively, before an aesthetic understanding of nature and experience is achieved.

Hence, literature needs to be productively conceived or 'imagined' and it is not, for that reason, a merely 'reproductive' formulation of the mind. The phenomenal world is, then, an ideological or an *a-priori* or a Platonic given which is, thereafter, brought to undergo the process of synthesis in order to conceive of a literary experience. A text draws its materials from the empirical conditions of man but this does not imply a non-existence of that transcendental or 'the original unity of apperception'.¹³ The author has to bring his intuition into play on universal phenomena before he goes on to creatively interpret human experience. His writing is, hence, mediated by his own perception and interpretation of life and its situations. The imagination performs an activity that helps the author to create a supra-real world in which he often makes human subjects participate, as in fiction. But poetry may be more subjective and introspective so far as the poet's perception of an idea or a set of ideas is concerned. He often expresses the world through metaphors and metonymies – an activity that entails an intense sublimization of objects that are, at once, available to our direct or primary level of perception. This process of metaphorization results from the transcendentalizing faculty of poetic imagination that allows the poet to go beyond the limited nature of immediate perception and construct a new form of knowledge of the world and its objects. This creative mediation is of supreme significance for literature since it does not merely record experience, but rather attempts to develop a firm system of values that all humanity is universally tied with. What Crowther states about human creativity, in his *The Kantian Sublime*, is worthy to mention here:

... we feel an authentic astonishment at what human creativity can achieve. This harmonious tension between what is perceptually overwhelming and what is nevertheless known to be artifice provides ... the basis for one aspect of a specifically artistic sense of the sublime ...¹⁴

Literature, perhaps, then seeks to provide that 'unbounded expansion of the concept'.¹⁵ This is, perhaps, the greatest 'cognitive' benefit to be derived from nature, since our aesthetic delight is derived not only from 'instruction' but from that expansion of our mental horizons. Hence, philosophy lies in the birth of a hitherto unconceived vision that leads the reader to have 'a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding'¹⁶ of life and the world. The reader comes to perceive the author's compassionate view of humanity and has a glimpse of that truth which is wholly different from the 'truth' of the scientist. Different authors may have different means to reach that truth, but it is essentially that point of sublimity that they aspire to achieve. This truth may best be understood by an empathetic

involvement with a certain text, since the text is no longer a mere source either of information or of 'inferential knowledge about something',¹⁷ but rather becomes the source of knowledge that can be acquired only by means of a realization of 'living through'.¹⁸ This very process of 'living through' develops a 'refined awareness' and a 'moral insight' perhaps no other experience can offer, and therein lies the philosophical worth or value of a creative work of literature:

The value of a work of art as a work of art is intrinsic to the work in the sense that it is (determined by) the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers... It should be remembered that the experience a work of art offers is an experience *of the work itself*, and the valuable qualities of a work are qualities *of the work*, not of the experience it offers. It is the nature of the work that endows the work with whatever artistic value it possesses; this nature is what is experienced in undergoing the experience the work offers; and the work's artistic value is the intrinsic value of this experience. So a work of art is valuable as art if it is such that the experience it offers is intrinsically valuable.¹⁹

Literature as an Aesthetic of the Sublime

Any attempt to consider literature as a philosophical, a cultural, an artistic and an ideological artifact would entail a corresponding consideration of a literary text as an 'aesthetic' product that is able to disseminate manifold kinds of pleasure quintessential to the underlying value that the work is imbued with. By dint of this artistic worth – though here I am not going into what exactly comprises such a worth – a piece of work and, more particularly, a piece of text, does intrinsically allow for an aesthetic assessment that, in its turn, is a test of its worth. I would, here, bring into context what Berys Gaut says in his article 'The Ethical Criticism of Art':

In the narrow sense of the term, aesthetic value properties are those that ground a certain kind of sensory or contemplative pleasure or displeasure. In this sense, beauty, elegance, gracefulness, and their contraries are aesthetic value properties. However, the sense adopted here is broader: I mean by "aesthetic value" the value of an object *qua* work of art, that is, its artistic value.²⁰

What, perhaps, is more significant in such an aesthetic assessment of a work of art is the content or, to be precise, the nature of employment of a specialized use of language within a textual structure, and not necessarily the form, of a given text. A certain level of internalization or, in other words, a close association with the value of the text is, more often than not, demanded. A kind of an identification on the part of the reader or the literary critic or the art critic is necessary for him to see into a work of art. This identification may not only be limited to an appreciation of the aspect of performativity of the

language, that may be constitutive of rhetorical figures of speech, poetic imagery, rhyme patterns, uses of metre or any other nuanced linguistic feature, but also of the 'holistic grasp of its achievement'.²¹ Holism is especially true in the perception of artistic works since there are no pre-determined or explicitly definable categories by which a definitive standpoint can be taken when we go on to analyse the aesthetic value consisting of categories that are neither generalizable nor, for this reason, universal, since they do not possess an 'intrinsic aesthetic value'.²² They rather need to be put to a kind of an 'aesthetic use' by means of artistic expression that lends them the perceivable quality of aestheticity. The only, somewhat general, terms that can be used would be the 'depth' and 'breadth' of a work of art:

The profundity of any artistic interpretation and evaluation must, in turn, be regarded as a function of the "depth" and "breadth" we predicate of the artist's normative insight... The greatness of a work of art can be determined only by reference to *both* of these complementary criteria.²³

Artistic imagination that is able to bring about a human import in a work is, in the most obvious sense, able to give birth to a humanistic piece of writing with a potential aesthetic efficacy. Such a kind of writing would, for certain, be mediated by the artist's own sublime interpretations of the human condition. But, somewhat contrarily, we also do realize that 'Whatever the world of aesthetic contemplation may be, it is not the world of human business and passion: in it the chatter and tumult of material existence is unheard, or heard only as the echo of some more ultimate harmony...'²⁴

The topology of a work of art is, thus, metaphysical and complicated since the artist might have 'imagined everything and projected it into the painting'²⁵ and, equally diverse, are the forms of subjectivity of the literary critic and, hence, he comes to see the truth that constitutes the fundamental essence of the work in inconceivably and indiscriminately heterogeneous ways:

One person is more pleased with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery. One has a strong sensibility to blemishes, and is extremely studious of correctness: Another has a more lively feeling of beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects for one elevated or pathetic stroke. The ear of this man is entirely turned towards conciseness and energy; that man is delighted with a copious, rich, and harmonious expression. Simplicity is affected by one; ornament by another. Comedy, tragedy, satire, odes, have each its partisans, who prefer that particular species of writing to all others. [It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular

turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided.]²⁶

The aesthetic in art is, in essence, indicative of a silent appraisal of its beauty – a form of appreciation that needs a specialized training and perspicacity. The critic discovers meanings, from a work, that do not remain confined to seemingly limited textual contours. He constructs a world for himself – a space that is not only the dwelling place of his subjectivity but is also a trans-semantic ideality where he, in his turn, comes to create an onto-theology of his own that perhaps helps to posit a better world. The necessary element of ethicality, therefore, lies in these refined perceptions, in a Kantian sublimation of immediate sensations. It comprises the experience of the critic – the result of his distinctive confrontation with the text and the corollary of a unique synthesis between his 'empirical consciousness'²⁷ and his intuitive apperceptions. The work, then, allows for a spontaneous receptivity in developing an epistemological urge to see beyond 'empirical circumstances of individual[s] or social life'²⁸ on which the work primarily bases itself. The critic comes to cognize beyond his 'finite consciousness'²⁹ and 'the peculiarities of human thought'.³⁰ The work enables the creation of a new world in which an aesthetic contemplation transcendentalizes into a moral and ethical consciousness. Art enables, in this way, a 'categorical imperative', 'starting from primitive animism up to theological supranaturalism or mystical ineffability',³¹ to be enacted by the practical, aesthetic and 'cultural human being'.³² Art becomes a domicile for a multiplicity of 'transcendent functions of reason', by way of the critic's 'spiritual activity'³³ in search of 'the inconceivable mystery'³⁴ of all conscious phenomena.

All art, therefore, have a teleological implication, in the sense that it is the implied 'telos' that counts for the hermeneutic urgency of a text along with its ontological, yet metaphysical, reality. The aestheticity lies both in the mind of the critic and at the core of the artist's work that only seems to have a corporeal boundary to it. It may also be taken to lie beyond, perhaps sometimes not even in the work itself, but somewhere outside or beyond its spatio-temporal reality – somewhere in the consciousness and in the psyche. In this sense, a work of art may not be a conscious reflection of the psyche, but a rather subconscious one. But, the work comes to possess a mind of its own consisting of the subconscious reflections of the artist and, hence, the artist himself becomes his work. It is this event of 'becomingness' that lends the work its life, its organicity, its ontology; the aesthetic is its theology – the 'transcendental essence'. The work evolves to take the shape of an aesthetic phenomenon after it has been conceived, represented and, thus, reified. But, its value

lies in the negation of its reification, its tendentiality to impel, or even compel, the critic to remain in pursuit of the very sublimely concealed imaginaries that, when perceived, may usher in a 'cultural consciousness',³⁵ in a new world-view and a new 'ideal of humanity'.³⁶ Hence, the 'inner life forms'³⁷ are no longer the Kantian 'thing in itself', but rather are metaphysical illusions which the 'logos' cannot capture, incarcerate and perform. But, again seemingly contradictory though it may be, the ontology of the 'logos' – however elusive – cannot not be considered before 'seeing' or 'knowing', or coming to 'know', the metaphysics at work. The 'well-tempered whole'³⁸ of the work is rendered corporeally insubstantial, but is rather heightened by enlightened thinking to be the site for the formation of discursivity. Hence, the transcendental of a work lies in its future discursivity as well or, in other words, in the epistemological alleys and avenues it leads the critic to traverse, in the very element of its beyondness in relation to the conditions that occasioned its existence. The text becomes the site for the 'totality of all values of reason in an absolute unity',³⁹ whereby 'empirical consciousness' is transformed into a 'cultural and aesthetic consciousness'. The text is a piece of 'enlightened reason' and we, as critics of literature, can see it only by means of 'our little world of knowledge, willing, and formation'.⁴⁰ There is no fixed or definite law that can guide us to a formulaic proposition concerning the aesthetic value of a text which is a complex and heterogeneous structure within the domain of which various kinds of cognition are at work:

... like the world of art, the world of empirical, spatio-temporal existence, and likewise the world of ethical values, is not "encountered" immediately, but rests on principles of formation that critical reflection discovers, and whose validity critical reflection demonstrates. Thus, art is no longer isolated among the kinds of consciousness; rather, art is that which presents the "principle" of these kinds and their relationships in a new sense.⁴¹

Notes

1. Albert William Levi, *Literature, Philosophy and the Imagination*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962, p. 26.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
12. Sarah L. Gibbons, *Kant's Theory of Imagination: Bridging Gaps in Judgment and Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 2.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
14. P. Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 153-154.
15. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, pp. 314-315, quoted in Gibbons, *Kant's Theory of Imagination: Bridging Gaps in Judgment and Experience*, p. 141.
16. Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Malden, MA, Oxford, UK and Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 240.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
18. Dorothy Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*, Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969, p. 101, quoted in Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, p. 245.
19. Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1995, pp. 4-5, quoted in Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, p. 266.
20. Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 283-284, quoted in Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, p. 18. Originally published in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, Jerrold Levinson (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 182-203.
21. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, p. 21.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
23. Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics* (as a part of *Sources in Philosophy: A Macmillan Series*, Lewis White Beck [General Editor], New York: The Macmillan Company and London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1967, p. 75.
24. Stolnitz, *Aesthetics*, p. 60.
25. Meyer Schapiro, 'The Still Life as a Personal Object – A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh', in *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics*, Joseph Tanke and Colin McQuillan (eds.), New York, London, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 404.
26. David Hume, 'On the Standard of Taste', in *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics*, p. 196.
27. Sebastian Luft (ed.), *The Neo-Kantian Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 319.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 319.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 232.