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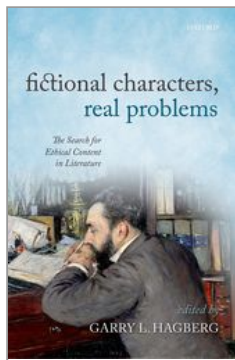
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Fictional Characters, Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature

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The Question of Truth in Literature

Die poetische Auffassung der Welt

Richard Eldridge

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter starts with the question of truth in literature, noting that this question has several interrelated senses: *can* literature present (significant) truths at all?; *what* does its presentation of truths (if it exists) have to do with its *manner* of presentation (with literary language)?; and *is* the presentation of truth a *central aim* of literary art? The chapter surveys a variety of neo-Fregean (Lamarque and Olsen, Walton) views that reject the very possibility of literary truth as well as a variety of anti-Fregean views (Goodman, Heidegger) that endorse it. But those endorsements often do not say enough about literary language and its grip on specific actualities. To move beyond this dispute, the chapter argues that Hegel, in his remarks on literary imagination in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, shows illuminatingly how literary writers sometimes arrive (and centrally aspire to arrive) at a distinctively poetic grasp of the world: *die poetische Auffassung der Welt*.

Keywords: literary truth, Lamarque and Olsen, Walton, Goodman, Heidegger, Hegel, poetic vision

1.

As Hegel remarks near the beginning of his discussion of literary art, “To define the poetic as such or to give a description of what is poetic horrifies nearly all who have written about poetry,” primarily because “the most heterogeneous works count as poetry.”¹ Hence it will help to begin by noting that the argument here is not intended to apply directly to all things that are reasonably called works of literature, but only to certain central cases of artistic literary

achievement. The question will then be, “What, if anything, do central cases of literary achievement have to do with the presentation of truth?”

There is some warrant for a focus primarily on central cases when we think of literature as a form of human practice that is significantly oriented, even if not sharply defined, by reference to its high achievements. Paying attention to what goes on in every case is likely to fail to illuminate both what is distinctively present in the central cases and what the lesser cases often (but not always) aim at but fail to achieve. To see this, consider baseball as a practice. When there are not enough players available, children sometimes play baseball with one field closed, or with throwing to the pitcher’s mound counting as throwing to first base, or with batters at the plate, without called balls or strikes, until they make contact and hit a ball into fair territory. Children who are just throwing a ball back and forth will often say that they are playing baseball, and it would be churlish to insist that they are not, simply because there are not eighteen players present observing all the rules of major league baseball. Even the official rules of major league baseball change over time. For example, new rules are introduced to deal with balls hitting ceilings or catwalks of indoor stadiums, or the powers and responsibilities of umpires to eject players are increased in order to reduce intentional beanings. One could try to develop an account of baseball that covered all cases of baseball games, from the World Series to children’s versions of street baseball, as well as everything in between, and reference to the rules of baseball, or to some version of them, will not be irrelevant. But such an account is likely to be less illuminating about the natures and interests of the various skills that are both aimed at and developed by players, such as agility and good hands for fielding or the abilities to hit or to throw a late-breaking slider, or about how the development and exercise of such skills figure in competitive situations. Fans of baseball know about and pay attention not only to the rules of baseball and not only to particular teams, such as the Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs, but also to how skills are developed, exercised, and tested in relation to competitive situations over time, particularly at the highest levels, but also sometimes in settings where younger players are either practicing for higher levels of play or simply enjoying themselves, often quite informally. One way, though not the only way, to get a grip on all these varieties of baseball practice is to pay attention to what is remarkable and memorable about some of the best cases of baseball achievement: to Ozzie Smith’s way of playing shortstop or to Mariano Rivera’s slider or to Ryan Howard’s power to left field.

Matters grow even more interesting when we pay attention to the achievements of a team at a high level, where we focus on how quite divergent sets of skills on the part of different players are brought into play in various ways over time and under changing conditions of stadium, weather, injury, age, and so on, in order to maximize a team’s chances of winning. An attentive fan will typically know a good deal about developing—that is, variously advancing, eroding, and changing

—skill sets and chances of winning of a number of major league teams playing at a high level. If knowledgeable fans are asked what they find interesting or engaging or important about baseball, they will probably, if they are articulate and in a reflective mood, mention something like this, and what they have to say will be illuminating in a general way about the interest of baseball and about achievements within it.

Something like this is true about literature as a practice. One could try to generate a precise extensionally adequate definition of literature. But given the varieties of literary practice, any such definition is likely to be wildly disjunctive, **(p.121)** to miss some marginal but by no means unimportant or uninteresting cases (comparable to children's adaptations of baseball to their local circumstances), and to fail to illuminate the aims of literary art.² It would be a fatal objection against proceeding by considering certain central cases of literary achievement if one either wildly misidentified central cases, such that the choices just seemed arbitrary in relation to the experiences of many readers, or if one said wildly implausible things about them, just as if one tried to illuminate the development and exercise of distinctive skill sets in baseball by focusing on only a haphazard local sandlot game. It would be problematic if the characterizations of the central cases could not be related, with adjustments and compensations, to what is going on in a wider range of cases. But keeping these risks in mind, it seems reasonable to wade in to the topic of what certain literary writers do, when they are managing to do something centrally important within literary practice, and then just to go on from there.

2.

One of the most prominent and persistent ways to try to characterize what literary writers *are* doing is to compare their work with what goes on in the natural sciences, history, and other so-called cognitive disciplines. Literary works are frequently though by no means always fictional, so that the literary enterprise cannot be devoted primarily to offering news, backed by reasons drawn from experiments, calculations, archival research, and so forth, about mind-independent objects of experience. Even when they are not fictional, literary **(p.122)** works invite and reward attention to their surfaces, to their exact ways of rendering a content, rather than only to the content rendered.³

In historical retrospect, it is easy to see why it is natural for many of us, at least since the seventeenth century, to talk of literary works as made for the sake of enjoyment or appreciation or reflection on themes rather than for the presentation of truth. Whereas the Homeric epics were pre-eminent among a small number of literary works that were performed at festivals for hundreds of years and that embodied and sustained the sense of a relatively isolated historical people about the worth of a way of life, and whereas the Bible and perhaps associated sermons were for a millennium among the few literary texts that many people would encounter, the invention of movable type, not to

mention all subsequent varieties of text presentation, has made available to us uncountable numbers of stories with many different plots. Coupled with increasingly complex commercial life and awareness of distinct spheres of culture—linguistic, geographic, trading, agricultural, and so on—our encounters with manifold diverse texts make it natural for us to speak of appreciation and enjoyment in place of the presentation of a single, more or less coherent set of truths about value in life.⁴ In contrast with the pluralization of literary works and literary experience, modern experimental–mathematical natural science is the big dog in the room, with a seeming monopoly on methodologically achieved consensus and truth-presentation.

Whatever is going on in the generation and reception of modern literary works, it may then seem that it cannot centrally be a matter of the presentation of truths. Something else must be said about what literature is all about. As Frege notoriously remarks, literary works frequently lack

the striving for truth which urges us to penetrate beyond the sense to the nominatum. ... [I]n listening to an epic, for example, we are fascinated by the euphony of the language and also by the sense of the sentences and by the images and emotions evoked.⁵

(p.123) Depending, however, on what one makes of what is going on when one is “fascinated by the euphony of the language and also by the sense of the sentences and by the images and emotions evoked”—and Frege offers no further characterization of what is going on—this characterization of our interest in literary achievement is *prima facie* inadequate. Talk of euphony directs our attention only to the surface of the literary work, as it were, without any reference to its presentational or representational power; and fascination by sense and by images and emotions evoked suggests an at least unclarified “inner” process. One wants to ask at least: what is the character and what is the interest of such fascination? And: can we describe it more fully, in terms that will make manifest not only the persistence, but also the reasonableness of our engagement with literature, rather than casting it as a psychological quirk that is more or less trivial in comparison with the serious businesses of the sciences?

In a Fregean vein, but with considerably more sophistication about and insight into literary experience, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen have argued against the idea that literary works present truths about mind-independent objects of experience and for the idea that the appropriate experience of a work of literature is centrally a matter of the appreciation of its artistic value. Negatively, they argue that we often appreciate and value works of literature even when they fail to show us “what it is like” for a character to be in a situation and fail to enrich or to modify our possessions of concepts.⁶ Hence literary achievement cannot be a function only either of the presentation of truths about subjective experience or of conceptual enrichment. Positively, they

develop a conception of literary achievement as “its own form of insight, its own kind of interpretation of thematic concepts,”⁷ where the forwarding of insight and interpretation are best thought of as forms of the cultivation of *understanding* rather than of the acquisition of new *knowledge*. As Lamarque has more recently put it, literary art

is valued for the seriousness with which it treats themes of universal interest, like life and death or love and duty, and these themes handled well invite serious reflection; but the idea that attention to such themes issues in practical or instrumental usefulness, making better or wiser or more morally sensitive people out of those exposed to art, as opposed to those with no such exposure, is not empirically well founded.⁸

(p.124) The accounts of the value of literary experience that Lamarque and Olsen put forward are attractive and serious, and they offer us a richer vocabulary of appreciation, of reflection on themes, and of the cultivation of understanding for describing that experience than anything that is on view in Frege. And yet the difficulty that troubles their stance is not far from what troubles Frege’s. Just what is going on when we acquire new *understanding* of a phenomenon via serious reflection on the themes of a literary work? The term *understanding* suggests a cognitive achievement, not just the psychological quirk of fascination. But then one wants to know more about the nature of this achievement. Just what is literary understanding like? What are its objects, and in what ways is, or isn’t, it a form of *knowledge*? (Parenthetically, it is worth noting that the issue about the effects of serious literary works on those who read them is not easy to settle empirically—the difficulty being that it is unclear how we might even begin to measure such effects. We would have to identify serious works, we would have to find a body of readers who had reflected on them seriously, perhaps within a practice of critical conversation, and we would have to find a control group of people equivalent to our readers in familial and social background—which are surely massively important for the formation and development of character—in order to isolate the effects of reading. It is not at all clear that we could find two such groups—serious readers and non-readers of otherwise equivalent backgrounds—and the terms “serious” and “reflected on” are not obviously open to parameterization in terms of variables that can be assigned a number via standard techniques of measurement. And yet many of us do retain a sense that serious reading—of course along with critical conversation and the massively significant effects of familial and social background—does make a difference to our characters.) To return to the problems of knowledge and truth: if, as Lamarque and Olsen admit, successful literary works “develop a theme in depth ... through subject and form,”⁹ in such a way that understanding is advanced, why ought we then *not* to talk both of readers coming to know something and of the literary work’s ability to present truths, even if we will

then still face the task of illuminating in more detail exactly how these tricks are done?

Kendall Walton goes further than Lamarque and Olsen to describe the interest of literature as bound up with its power to present objects and incidents, while nonetheless himself also remaining broadly within the Fregean orbit. Against Frege, Walton denies that either fictional or more broadly literary language is either derivative from or less important than literal or scientific world-representing language. It is, he writes, “wrong to the core” to hold “that fiction (p.125) is parasitic on ‘serious’ discourse, that fictional uses of language, pictures, or anything else are to be understood in terms of their use in making assertions, asking questions, issuing orders, or engaging in other activities characteristic of nonfictional language.”¹⁰ Literature and the other representational arts are their own forms of practice, and they are forms of serious business, involving the presentation of objects, persons, actions, and events for the sake, among other things, of cognitive advances. And yet there is a crucial, central difference, as in Frege, between what is presented in literal description and what is presented in (most or many) works of representational art. The objects, persons, events, and actions presented in a fictional literary work do not literally exist. Hence unlike “biographies, textbooks, newspaper articles,” and so on, which “*are* used to claim truth for certain propositions,” fictional literary representations “serve as props in games of make-believe.”¹¹ Representational works of art in general “are made specifically for the purpose of being used as props in games of certain kinds, indefinitely many of them played by different appreciators on different occasions.”¹²

The Fregean lineage of Walton’s position is clear. Literature just doesn’t engage with the real in the way that natural science does. Instead it traffics in another, artificial world—the work world, or the world that it sets up by prescribing to us to make believe that things are thus and so. At first blush, one can worry about this position that, as John Gibson puts it, offers “a picture of fiction as fodder for fantasy,”¹³ detached from life. Walton’s reply to this is that however detached from engagement with the real (in comparison with the natural sciences) fictional texts and other literary works may be, trafficking with them is nonetheless a serious business that engages with the real *indirectly*. We respond to literary texts not with real emotions—since we lack the readiness to act in relevant ways and the belief in the existence of real persons that are characteristic of genuine person-directed emotions—but with quasi-emotions, that is, emotional contours, as it were, or emotions stripped of the components of action-readiness and belief. Through quasi-emotional engagement with literary works, we are able to practice at what it is at least *like* to feel thus and so, in ways that are prescribed by the work, *freely*, from a position that is insulated from responsibilities and urgencies. This practice with quasi-emotions

enables readers, as Walton puts it, to arrive at “deepened awareness of themselves and their situations.”¹⁴

(p.126) This is an attractive suggestion on Walton’s part. Yet it seems in the end only to restate the problem. What, exactly, is the nature of the “deepened awareness” of ourselves and our situations at which we may arrive? In particular, how is this centrally a matter of the invocation and shaping of emotions? Just how *like* real emotions are quasi-emotions? If they are *very* like real emotions directed at really existing persons, objects, and situations, then the puzzle seems to remain about how we are able to feel even quasi-emotions with respect to fictional objects. If they are *less* like real emotions—if the absence of readiness to act and of belief in the real existence of a relevant object make an important difference—then we are faced with the question of how practice in having and reflecting on quasi-emotions carries over into the having of appropriate genuine emotions in real life. Perhaps the circumstances of reading as opposed to those of life are just different enough that no real emotional training for life arises out of reading; sitting quietly with a book in hand seems on the face of it quite detached from being bound up emotionally in the direct pressure of life’s urgencies. Quasi-emotions as mere emotional contours, emptied of belief, may be pale and irrelevant to responding with feeling when one *does* believe certain things are really going on.

Worse yet for Walton’s view, sometimes—for example as in much lyric poetry—an actual object *is* in view as a focus for imaginative and emotional attention. Here we are, with Sylvia Plath, say, directly invited to imagine and attend emotionally to what it is like for her actually to have cut her thumb (and thought and felt about it) while slicing onions when pregnant. This makes it clear that, as Richard Moran argues,

emotional aspects of imagination ... should ... be seen as part of the *manner* of imagining and not as something that must belong to the content of what is imagined. ... Imagining something with apprehension is the description of something the person is actually engaged in, and is not something within the scope of what is imagined.¹⁵

That is, paying attention imaginatively (and emotionally) to what is going on, whether fictional or factual, is a way of holding that subject matter in view and trying to get clearer about its significance. Here Moran shares with Walton the thought that experiences of a literary work involve exercises of imagination that include “‘trying on’ the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it,”¹⁶ as a point of view is directed to its intended objects, which objects may now, **(p.127)** Moran notes, be either actual or fictional. In emphasizing that imagining is an active doing of something that may be prompted by the real and may have a *manner* or style, Moran helps us to see how literary attention is structured by devices of emplotment and figuration. Literary attention does not

drive toward transparency in presenting a work-world for the sake of make-believe as accurately as possible. Instead, diction, figuration, and emplotment (making narrative connections among incidents, thoughts, and emotional engagements) highlight and structure how things, whether fictional or actual, may *matter* for us. Literary texts that use such devices “are expressive of a certain complex attitude”¹⁷ that may be directed indifferently at either fictional or really existing attentional objects and that may be subjected to development and clarification by the unfolding contours of plot and of literary surface as devices of attention. This point is already registered in Aristotle’s distinction between *theoria* and *mimesis*. Both theories and mimetic representations can be presented in words. Hence words as such are not the medium of mimetic literary representation, which is rather a matter of words used in a distinctive way to attend to the real, a way that involves imagining and that was developed from “improvisations ... little by little” and that may involve “traditional stories” about what has in fact gone on in certain families.¹⁸ Thus, as Joseph Margolis elegantly puts it, contra Walton, “the imaginative is hardly limited to the imaginary,”¹⁹ and that it is a mode of presentation of the actual may sometimes be what is most important about it.

What Moran does not yet quite account for however, beyond the talk, following Walton, of practice and training, is any possible truth-content of the literary work. Though literary attention involving imaginative and emotional engagement may be directed at the real, the emphasis still lies on the training of imagination and emotional response rather than on the presentation of truths. Moran does end his essay with the thought that “we seem committed to the idea that imagination is a vehicle of knowledge of various kinds,” for example as in thought experiments, but he confesses that “we understand very little of how exercises of the imagination relate to *learning* anything about the world, or about our concepts, or about ourselves.”²⁰

(p.128) 3.

Perhaps then, rather than focusing on the line that emphasizes what readers are doing when they are engaging with literary works and how they are changing as a result, we should turn to sharply anti-Fregean views that directly emphasize the ability of works of art, literary and otherwise, to present truths. Prominent among these views is the work of Nelson Goodman. His 1976 *Languages of Art* was motivated primarily by an effort to avoid estheticist views of art and instead to see media of art as involving the use of symbol systems, distinct in their structural syntactic and semantic features from the ‘literal’ sentential symbol systems of the natural sciences, but equally apt for presenting truths. Where the natural sciences use sentences ‘directly’ representationally, artistic symbol systems use other symbols depictively, as in painting, where the symbol system is semantically and syntactically replete (every alteration of the smallest mark makes a difference), or expressively, as when words are used to recast schemata for the presentation of objects, as in metaphors. Yet in art as in science,

presentation of the truth is a predominant aim. As Goodman puts it, the experience of art “is cognitive experience distinguished by the dominance of certain symbolic characteristics and judged by standards of cognitive efficacy.”²¹

The trouble, however, with this view is that it threatens to undervalue, both in science and in art, the constraints on correctness of representation and on the presentation of truth that come from the world. Rightness of rendering, according to Goodman, “is primarily a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization,” as may be. “The differences between fitting a version to a world, a world to a version, and a version together or to other versions fade when the role of versions in making the worlds they fit is recognized.”²² Goodman resists the charge that talk, indifferently, of fitting versions to one another or to the world amounts to a misunderstanding or undervaluing of objectivity and of the constraints on our practices that are set by the real.

When the verbiage view [that all there are are versions, no givens] threatens to dissolve everything into nothing, we insist that all true versions describe worlds. When the right-to-life sentiment [—let a thousand worlds bloom, together with all their objects—] threatens an overpopulation of worlds, we call it all talk.²³

(p.129) In practice, we sort things out on the ground roughly, without worrying much about metaphysical realism vs. metaphysical idealism.

Rough, ready, contextual, and in principle provisional though our sortings out of our cognitive commitments may be, however, it is not clear that Goodman’s somewhat cavalier pragmatism either will or should satisfy practitioners of either natural science or literary art. In both natural science and literary art, sources of correction seem to practitioners often to come from the world itself. Albeit that a lot of interpretive work based on wider assumptions and practices is required, the structure of a DNA molecule is a double helix, not a single helix, given the images on the X-ray diffraction films. And likewise the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, along with the marriages of their rough real-world counterparts, just is more compellingly and honorably an image and vehicle of potential human happiness than are the marriages of Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins, or Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, along with their real-world counterparts.

In a radically different idiom, Martin Heidegger insists that “*art is then the becoming and happening of truth.*”²⁴ Arriving at this claim initially by way of a (contested) analysis of a Van Gogh painting of worn, dirt-covered “country” shoes, Heidegger construes this truth as a matter of “unconcealedness, ... *aletheia*,” whereby “some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining.”²⁵ While it is not initially clear what “standing in the

light of its being” and “coming into the steadiness of its shining” involve on the part of the shoes that are presented in and via the painting, it is clear that the work itself is not to be construed as either simply a mere thing on its own or as a copy of what it represents. Rather the work has a disclosive function; something essential about the very being of the shoes as artifact is made manifest. As Heidegger then goes on to develop his analysis of art’s disclosive powers via discussion of a Greek temple, it emerges that what is disclosed is *how* a (typical, central) artifact functions in the life of a historical people, so that what is disclosed is the-thing-in-central-relation-to-a-way-of-life, where Heidegger’s term for a broad way of life that is historically established and grounded on the earth is *world*.

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. ... Genuinely poetic projection [which **(p.130)** takes place in and through all genuine art] is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast.²⁶

One can object to the extreme selectivity of Heidegger’s examples, as though one or two paintings, a Greek temple, and six or eight poems by Hölderlin and Rilke could stand in for the whole of art. Within a governing focus on central cases, however, selectivity by itself is not an obvious failing. More significant are the problems with Heidegger’s treatments of his examples. It is by no means clear that he reads the Van Gogh painting correctly,²⁷ let alone the poetry of Hölderlin.²⁸ With regard to Hölderlin in particular, Heidegger puts in place of Hölderlin’s own situated, tentative, malleable expressive subjectivity a picture of Hölderlin as a mere vessel for the confident self-opening of Being toward the formation of a new historical world. At the theoretical level, this comes out in Heidegger’s own over-confident talk of “*the* destiny of *an* historical people,” as though the identity-conditions for historical peoples and their destinies were clear, in prospect as well as in retrospect. In addition, Heidegger’s talk of the disclosive powers of art, while situating art firmly on the side of cognition, pays comparatively little attention to the workings of specific, often multivalent, devices of poetic formation. Specific individual lines, words, and images are read on their own with relatively little feel for their dramatic contexts and for the tentativeness of the overall emplotment of a Hölderlin poem. If the members of the family of post-Fregean views tend to focus too much on the powers and effects of poetry within the psychologies of individual reading subjects and to be shy about the presentation of truth, the anti-Fregean views tend to focus too much on works and their alethic presentational powers, with too little attention given to how works are generated and received by complex, historically situated subjectivities that are the bearers of multi-dimensional thoughts and attitudes. Hence they risk distorting or failing to capture the needs and interests of these subjectivities that are served by works of literary art.

In each case—the post-Fregean views of Lamarque and Olsen and Walton and the anti-Fregean views of Goodman and Heidegger—the development of the **(p. 131)** view is shaped significantly both by a contrast with the practices and achievements of the natural sciences and by concentration on the effects of literature on its audiences more than by direct attention to what writers of works of literary art are trying to do and doing. That is, while the topics of the effects and uses of literature, both psychological and social, and of the poetic mode of construction of a work and its presentation of a content, are surely intimately connected with one another,²⁹ beginning with close attention to the latter topic may help us to avoid some of the oversimplifications that result from an initial concentration on uses and effects in comparison with those of science.

4.

Among philosophers who have treated at length the nature of poetic construction and its presentation of a content and who have done so in full awareness of the historical varieties of literary works, Hegel is pre-eminent. Hegel's account of the ability of poetry to present a distinctive kind of truth centers around what he calls *die poetische Auffassung [ihrer Gegenstände]* in contrast with *die prosaische Auffassung* (LFA 2: 972; 15: 239). ("Poetry" is Hegel's general term for all forms of literary art; indeed, what he calls the poetic "runs through" all forms of art [LFA 1: 89; 13: 123].) The word *Auffassung* is translated as "treatment" by Knox, suggesting rightly enough poetry's way of handling its objects. But *Auffassung* also suggests more broadly *conceiving of, paying attention to, perceiving, grasping, or taking in*. Throughout his discussion, that is, Hegel describes *die poetische Auffassung* as a manner of world-intake or attention to the objects of a world: "attention [Aufmerksamkeit] is drawn [by the work] precisely to the appearing existent [*das erscheinende Dasein*]" (LFA 2: 1005; 15: 281; translation modified). But this manner of attention to an object is both distinct from either abstract thought or science, on the one hand, or the pure presentation of particulars via sensation, on the other, and it is bound up with the specifically poetic use of language.

Poetry displays the unification [of conception and execution] most strikingly, in that it is essentially to be interpreted as a withdrawal [Herausgehen] from the real world of sense perception as well as a subordination of that world, yet not however as a production that does not dare to engage in embodiment [Verleiblichung] and movement in the external **(p.132)** world. ... The poetic expression gives us *more*, because it adds to the understanding of the object a vision [Anschauung] of it, or rather it dispenses with [entfernt] the bare abstract understanding and puts the real determinacy of the object [die reale Bestimmtheit] in its place. ... When [poetry] attains its aim, not only is it liberated from that separation between thinking which is concentrated on the universal, and feeling and vision [Anschauung], which seize on [auffassen] the individual, but it also at the same time frees these latter forms of consciousness

together with their content and objects out of their mere servitude and conducts them victoriously toward reconciliation with what is in itself universal (LFA 2: 967–8, 1002, 1006; 15: 234, 277, 282; translation modified).

While the terminology in this passage is perhaps now foreign to us, the line of thinking is clear. Poetry is different from both scientific classification and the sensible intuition of particulars in that it attends to objects in such a way that thinking, feeling, and intuition remain bound up with one another. Hence it is different from free fantasy or make-believe in its engagements with objects, it is different from idle feeling, and it is different from abstract generalization. Presenting instead the real determinacy of the object attended to, in such a way that reconciliation with what is universal is achieved, is a matter of locating the object within a framework of imaginative emplotment that reveals its significance in relation to developing human life. The object attended to may be as initially simple as a field of daffodils or as complex as the French Revolution and its effects on human character. What is important is that the object attended to is presented as “animated, manifest, ensouled” (LFA 2: 973; 15: 241), insofar as it is bound up via the work with a now more intelligible plot of human efforts to achieve freedom as being-with-oneself-in-an-other within the actual world, bound up, that is, with what Hegel calls the self-developing universal.

Accordingly, the chief task of poetry is to bring before our minds the powers governing spiritual life, and, in short, all that surges to and fro in human passion and feeling or passes quietly through our meditations—the all-encompassing realm of human ideas, deeds, actions, and fates, the bustle of life in this world, and the divine rule of the universe. Thus poetry has been and is still the most universal and widespread teacher of the human race. For to teach and to learn is to know and experience what *is*. ... Man exists conformably to the law of his existence only when he knows what he is and what his surroundings are: he must know what the powers are which drive and direct him, and it is such a knowledge that poetry provides in its original and substantive form (LFA 2: 972–3; 15: 239–40).

To bring before our minds not just the individual physical or sensible object of attention (whether object, person, incident, or scene), and not just the object as an instance of an abstract universal, but rather the object as ensouled, in being bound up in a plot of the development of the powers that drive us, requires specific means of poetic responsiveness that are distinct from sensible intake, **(p.133)** measurement, and straightforward classification. Analytically, we can distinguish in a literary work at least four levels of the work’s organization: (1) its acoustical or graphical surface, that is, the sheer sound or look of its words; (2) its plot, which may include not only sequences of public actions on the part of characterized figures, but also sequences of reflections, reactions, and feelings; (3) its theme, that is, *what* the elements of the plot that are presented have to do

with each other, in presenting, as Aristotle puts it, “things that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity”³⁰ in human life; and (4) its persona, that is, the presented authorial intelligence that is both developing the presented incidents and is engaged with them. These levels are analytically, not experientially, distinct. Writers of literary art typically attend to all four levels of organization as they develop the work, and in reading we tend primarily to alternate between attention to plot and theme, with attention to surface and authorial personae implicit and always available as possibilities. Running throughout each of these levels of textual organization are diction and figuration—the presentation of objects and incidents through imaginative comparison and stylized mode of attention. The intent and the effect of a work of literary art is, precisely through comprehensive organization on each of these levels as well as the use of figuration and diction, to compel and guide sustained attention to the particulars that are presented. Hegel writes of how, when the incidents presented are “vitaly interwoven” [“lebendig ineinander verwebt”], we are brought by the work to “tarry in” or “linger with pleasure over” [“verweilen”] what is presented, as its significance for thought, feeling, and “the powers governing spiritual life” is made manifest through the text’s densities of organized attention (LFA 2: 979, 981; 15: 248, 250–1). Hegel discusses in detail poetic versification, including rhyme and rhythm, poetic expression in contrast with prosaic expression, poetic subjectivity, and the forms of emplotment that are especially salient at distinct stages of human historical life—that is, epic, ancient, and modern dramatic poetry, and lyric, where lyric, though more distinctly important in modernity, is also available at any civilized and settled historical epoch.

5.

Yet, for all that Hegel’s account of poetic attention to the objects, persons, scenes, and incidents of a world offers a compelling account of the work of literary art in relation to human historical life in the world, it is also likely, at least in part, to strike us as overconfident. Is there really only one coherent set of “powers (**p.134**) governing spiritual life,” one self-developing universal aiming fruitfully at freedom as comprehensive being-with-oneself-in-an-other? It is difficult for anyone nowadays to be a Hegelian just like that, taking there to be only one self-developing universal manifesting itself everywhere in intelligible ways, at least retrospectively. Do the genres of epic, ancient drama, modern drama, and lyric succeed one another as central poetic forms in just that way, with the task of bringing sheer particulars into reflective and emotional clarity allotted to lyric, once the serious task of orientation in modern life is given over to philosophy’s descriptions of governing institutions of successful modern social life? Does art, literary or otherwise, succeed in forming common audiences of wide circumference who respond alike to the powers of presentation of specific works, or are there, always, divergences of response and persistent interpretive and critical disputes?

There are no simple, ready answers to these questions. Hegel admits explicitly that there is not now, in modernity, much consensus about art's contents and achievements. In contrast with the more direct concern with spiritual powers that is typical of Symbolic (especially Egyptian) and Classical (especially Greek) art, in modern, post-Christian art

everything has a place, every sphere of life, all phenomena, the greatest and the least, the supreme and the trivial, the moral, immoral, and evil; and, in particular, the more art becomes secular, the more it makes itself at home in the finite things of the world, is satisfied with them, and grants them complete validity, and the artist does well when he portrays them as they are (LFA 1: 594; 14: 221).

Art has freed itself "from the content represented"; it has "got rid of [that] content which [hitherto] on every occasion was determinate for a particular people [and] a particular age" (LFA 1: 604; 14: 234).³¹ As a result, "we no longer bow our knee" (LFA 1: 103; 13: 142) before the presentations of art, but instead interpret, evaluate, discuss, and dispute about taste, all in relation to works in manifestly divergent media with manifestly divergent contents.

All this is more than likely, and with good reason, to raise questions about the objectivity of both critical judgment and artistic achievement in comparison with the objectivity in supporting rational consensus methodologically that is significantly more characteristic of the sciences. Absent objectivity comparable to that of the sciences, doubts are likely to persist, again with good reason, about the ability of art, literary and otherwise, to present a truth-content or to yield cognitive insight.

(p.135) But it also true that modern life and the modern mathematical-scientific thinking that is prominent within it are themselves, as Hegel poignantly puts it, persistently "burdened with abstraction" (LFA 2: 1128; 15, 437). It is easy, perhaps even commonplace, to grow up and then to live with a sense of going through the motions, as one submits to (or fails to live up to) the demands of education and of a job within a complex, technologically and socially differentiated system of labor. It is all too easy, and perhaps commonplace, to feel, at least at times, that things aren't making sense and that one's life is a matter only of happenstance and perhaps the pursuit of resources for private satisfactions. In these circumstances—with many of us at some times in the grip of a persistent need for and interest in orientation, reassurance, and animation in relation to our activities, institutions, and relationships—it may be more than reasonable to take seriously the literary artist's "insight into the essence of human action" (LFA 2: 1179; 15: 502), as that insight may be achieved and sustained, however multivalently, through powers of literary form to present materials of human life for the clarification of thought and feeling.

In a discussion of what he calls “romance, the modern popular epic” or of what we can recognize as the novel, Hegel notes that there remains in life “conflict between the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances and the accidents of external situations” (LFA 2: 1092; 15: 393), as modern human beings face the problem of blending codifiable routine (the prose of circumstances) with sense and feeling (the poetry of the heart). In both art and life, such conflicts may be resolved, he goes on,

comically or tragically, or alternatively ... when the characters originally opposed to the usual order of things learn to recognize in it what is substantive and really genuine, when they are reconciled with their circumstances and effective in them, or when the prosaic shape of what they do and achieve is stripped away, and therefore what they had before them as prose has its place taken by a reality akin and friendly to beauty and art (LFA 2: 1092–3; 15: 393).

Here the tragic and the comic involve, respectively, coming to terms with what one has errantly done as a result of persisting in a misdirected exercise of what is normally a virtue (as in Aristotelian reversal and recognition) or finding life good enough anyway, despite the reversals that it contains. But the two further cases are yet more interesting. We may sometimes learn to recognize what is substantive in how things are done and to become reconciled with it, as in a classic Bildungsroman plot, or we may achieve, at least in certain respects, a substantial enough re-enchantment of the world, as perhaps in a romance, where a couple recognizes and lives in mutual improvisation of their secret **(p. 136)** affinities, achieving together something like joint purposiveness without an exterior purpose.³²

However multiple, pluralized, and closed to ready generalization they may be, these do seem to be possibilities of human life that take on specific shapes anew under changing circumstances and that can be made manifest by literary art, with its characteristic devices of attention to the real (emplotment, thematization, the modeling of attitude by an authorial persona, figuration, diction, and all the rest). In making these possibilities of life manifest in their specific shapes—showing, one might say, the universal in the particular—works of literary art hence have a power to present and reveal content that is latent in life. We can understand fictional and other literary works as tracking what tends to become of characters who come equipped with understandings of life, where these understandings of life are in circulation in general culture and not only within literary texts. As the literary scholar Ottmar Ette usefully puts it,

the dynamic modeling of literary characters [involves] a complex choreography of individuals who are variously equipped with understandings of life. Thus there appear in the cradle of the modern European novel in *Don Quixote* two characters, who from the beginning are

in possession of sharply opposed understandings that are then brought into contact with one another, experimentally “tested”, reflected, and modified, in ever new turnings and adventures within the fictional laboratory. While Sancho Panza appeals to the world of the Spanish proverb and thus to the form of knowledge of life of Iberian popular culture that has accumulated in proverbs, ... the knowledge of life of Don Quixote stands for brilliance and danger, and for creativity and the collapse of a world created by means of fiction that has immediately and fatally penetrated into the direct practice of life.³³

Or we might understand the recent novels of, say, Jonathan Franzen (*Freedom*, 2010) and Jennifer Egan (*A Visit from the Goon Squad*, 2010) as each exploring a tendency, with all but infinite shades of variation, of certain largely middle-class characters within a highly media-saturated consumerist culture to live out infantile conceptions of happiness as a matter of unrestrained choice directed toward achieving continuous momentary hedonic pleasure. What becomes of living within this tendency—a tendency that is present in our society and in many of us at some moments— what alternatives to living according to this tendency **(p.137)** there might be, how these alternatives might be arrived at, and what in turn their consequences might be: all this is held in view for us, or at least undertaken to be held in view for us, by these novels.³⁴

Given, however, the manifest pluralization of tendencies of life in the modern world, taking seriously such explorations of present but often unarticulated tendencies and possibilities of life as the truth-content of literary art will almost certainly leave us with a somewhat bifurcated concept of truth: methodologically achieved consensus about world-correspondent propositional contents for the natural sciences vs. understanding of salient human possibilities for and hindrances to reconciling the prose of life with the poetry of the heart for the literary arts. Or, to be more precise,³⁵ it may leave us with a bifurcation in methods for arriving at truths and a division between two distinct domains of phenomena about which truths may be sought: mind-independent, neutrally measurable reality, and the social worlds of persons-in-relation-to-objects (including other persons). With respect to this latter domain, the task is not that of law-formulation or prediction or control or even neutral representation of the mind-independent, but rather, as Benjamin Rutter puts it, that of “expanding” or at least scrutinizing “the habitation of human life”³⁶ via specifically artistic and literary devices of attention to it.

This bifurcation—in methods for aiming at truth, in domains open to truth-seeking, and in breadth of achieved consensus—may, in its way, cause unease. Debates about whether literary art embodies significant truth-content in a form of presentation that is in any way reliable are likely to persist. But it seems **(p. 138)** reasonable nonetheless to regard both natural science and literary art as forms of the presentation of a truth-content, and what else but debates about

reliability of presentation should one expect, for beings who are as complex and in possession of multiple interests and possibilities as we continue to find ourselves to be?

Notes:

(¹) G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), Vol. 2, p. 971. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in Hegel, *Werke*, Vols 13, 14, and 15 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), Vol. 15, p. 237. Hereafter cited in text by LFA, with English volume number and pagination preceding German; e.g., LFA 2: 971; 15: 237.

(²) Aiming primarily at extensional adequacy, Robert Stecker defines literature as follows:

“A work *w* is a work of literature if and only if *w* is produced in a linguistic medium, and, 1) *w* is a novel, short story, tale, drama, or poem, and the writer of *w* intended that it possess aesthetic, cognitive, or interpretation-centered value, and the work is written with sufficient technical skill for it to be possible to take that intention seriously, or 2) *w* possesses aesthetic, cognitive, or interpretation-centered value to a significant degree, or 3) *w* falls under a predecessor concept to our concept of literature and was written while the predecessor concept held sway, or 4) *w* belongs to the work of a great writer.” [“What is Literature?” in *Philosophy of Literature*, eds. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 71]. Here not only is the definition wildly disjunctive, it is also—given the vagueness of certain central terms (“aesthetic, cognitive, or interpretation-centered value,” “take seriously,” “to a significant degree,” “predecessor concept,” and “great writer”)—dubitable whether it is extensionally adequate, and it is pretty clearly not illuminating of what we care about when we care about literature, at least pending an extensive discussion, with reference to cases, of what “possession of aesthetic, cognitive, or interpretation-centered value to a significant degree” amounts to.

(³) Holding these two possible dimensions of literary work—the fictional and the highlighting of a manner of presentation—in mind, Monroe Beardsley defines a work of literature as a text that is either “an imitation illocutionary act” [e.g., a pretended or make-believe rather than real asserting, asking, promising, etc.] or a text that is “distinctly above the norm in ration of implicit [i.e., connotative, rhetorical, or figural] meaning to explicit meaning.” Beardsley, “The Concept of Literature,” from Beardsley, *Literary Theory and Structure* (1973), reprinted in *Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 57.

⁽⁴⁾ Notoriously, Georg Lukács describes our modern condition as one of “transcendental homelessness” in that we no longer live, as he takes the Homeric Greeks to have lived, within a sense of a single presiding plot about successes and failures to lead a valuable life. György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), p. 41.

⁽⁵⁾ Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Nominatum,” [1892], trans. Herbert Feigl, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich, 4th edn (New York: Oxford, 2001), p. 203A.

⁽⁶⁾ Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 379–86.

⁽⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁽⁸⁾ Peter Lamarque, “The Uselessness of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, 3 (Summer 2010), p. 212B.

⁽⁹⁾ Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 450.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 8.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁽¹²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁽¹³⁾ John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 172.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, p. 257.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Richard Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” *The Philosophical Review* 103, 1 (January 1994), p. 93.

⁽¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 48b, p. 5; 53b, p. 18.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Joseph Margolis, *The Cultural Space of the Arts and the Infelicities of Reductionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 135.

⁽²⁰⁾ Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” p. 106.

⁽²¹⁾ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), p. 262.

(²²) Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), p. 138.

(²³) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

(²⁴) Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 694.

(²⁵) *Ibid.*, pp. 665–6.

(²⁶) *Ibid.*, pp. 676, 697.

(²⁷) See Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," in Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society: Selected Papers*, Volume 4 (New York: Georges Braziller, 1998), pp. 135–42.

(²⁸) There is by now a massive literature, including important contributions by T. W. Adorno, David Constantine, Paul de Man, Hans-Jost Frey, and Dieter Henrich, among others, on what Heidegger gets wrong about Hölderlin. For a good overview and argumentative endorsement of these criticisms of Heidegger (while also appreciating what is at least interesting about Heidegger's work on art), see Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), chs 1–3, pp. 27–144.

(²⁹) Among theorists who *do* hold these two topics together and who devote substantial amounts of attention to the latter, Aristotle, in contrasting *poesis* with *theoria* and *praxis*, Collingwood, in contrasting expressive speech with symbolic speech, and Wordsworth, in asking "What is a Poet?" ["Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads*," in Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 453] are, along with Hegel, pre-eminent.

(³⁰) Aristotle, *Poetics*, 51a, p. 12.

(³¹) Cp. "The End of the Romantic Form of Art", pp. 602–11, for a general discussion of modern art's freedom from determination by specific, given content (LFA 1: 602–11; 14: 231–42).

(³²) Here I am alluding to the achievements of the principal pairs in the comedies of remarriage discussed by Stanley Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), but it also bears noting that Hegel in talking of entry into another, more enchanted reality seems to anticipate what Robert Musil will later describe as "der andere Zustand."

(³³) Ottmar Ette, "Literaturwissenschaft als Lebenswissenschaft: Eine Programmschrift im Jahr der Geisteswissenschaften," *Lendemains* 32/125 (2007), p. 23. My translation.

(³⁴) Although they have a common theme or a common problem situation in view—that of bringing together the prose of life and the poetry of the heart under the specific circumstances of present social life—one of these novels is, despite some bravura passages, arguably sentimental, given over to fantasy, and inattentive to actual plausibilities, hence false to life, while the other is not. I leave the discernment of which is which as an exercise for the reader.

(³⁵) Arguably, we should resist any proposed explicatory analysis of truth. Truth is one member of a family of semantic notions that are interdefinable, a family that includes satisfaction, meaning, understanding, and reference. None of these notions is either epistemically or metaphysically prior to the others, and none of them can be translated into an idiom that employs only notions from outside this family. This is one important reason for being wary of analyses of literary truth, no matter whether hostile or receptive to the very idea of truth in literature, that presuppose an understanding of truth (as correspondence, as *aletheia*, a fit among words, etc.) that undertakes either to move outside this semantic family or to take one among its members to be epistemologically or metaphysically more fundamental than the others. See H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson, "In Defense of a Dogma," *Philosophical Review* LXV (1956), pp. 141–58.

(³⁶) Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 59.

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