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ON TRUTH IN LITERARY WORKS

One of the recurring questions we have concerning literature is the question, do literary works contain, embody or express truths. Can we talk about truth when we talk about literature? There seem to be two opposite opinions on the matter: the first one being that it is not possible to talk of truth in connection with literature as we can't define truth in a way that would fit the fictitious nature of literature; the second one being that literary works do contain empirical truths about human behaviour and human life.

The discussion has been lying low in recent times, but I feel it is time to poke at the ant hill once again in an effort to understand what it is we talk about when we talk of truth in literature. I want to suggest that it is integral to our appreciation of literature that we connect it with concepts like truth. The philosophically pertinent question is, how do we understand the word "truth" in this context. Depending on our use of the word, we end up saying things like, it is logically irrelevant to talk about truth in connection with literary works, or, it is integral to literary works that they contain empirical truths or true propositions in order to teach us something. The former view, that speaking of truth in literature is logically out of place, goes together with the insistence of seeing literature as something essentially aesthetic, cut off from other aspects of our life. The latter one, the notion of empirical truths in literary texts being an important aspect of literature ties up with the cognitive role of literature - it is contended that literature teaches us something, and the notion of knowledge is intimately bound with the concept of truth.

Both of these views seem to me to build on a misconception of how we use the word when we talk about truth in the case of literature, and I shall try to

point out a way of discussing truth in literature in an intelligible way which does not commit us to *defining* truth once and for all, nor to theorizing about truth in literature.

The logical difficulty in defining the kind of truths we could encounter in literary works seems to have led to a certain devaluation of literature. Solving the problem by pointing to the fictitious nature of literature is a way of saying, this is all make-believe, the real truths of life you find elsewhere. Again, if we insist on empirical truths being brought forth by literature, we should be able to show a way in which these empirical truths can be validated. Also, we should be able to pick out the true assertions or propositions from the mass of fictitious text - in other words, we need a method of discerning between fiction and empirical truths in fiction.

What lies behind these ways of thinking of truth? Obviously, truth is being taken as something which can be defined, something that can be given the necessary and sufficient conditions for. We are operating with something that can be measured and tested. We are talking about propositions here - statements that can be proved to be true, or whose truth is independent of us and our life. Speech-act theory lurks behind the effort to see literary works as consisting of utterances which can either be true or fictitious, and it is contended that the empirical truths literature contains can be picked out from the text by their resemblance to claims about reality which are used outside the realm of literary works. But is it appropriate to apply this kind of notion of truth to literature?

Of course, there are certain kinds of truths we can talk about in literature which give us no headache at all - we can discuss *facts* in a literary text. By these I mean historical, geographical, biographical and scientific facts. But this is not what puzzles us when we talk of truth in literature.

Facts give us no trouble - what we are interested in are questions like, what is it that makes us think "oh but it's so true", "yes, that's exactly how it is" when we are reading a work of literature. We are puzzled at our own acceptance of these works. We want to know, how is it possible that this fiction can be "so true"? How can a fictitious tale express profound truths of human life? And how true is the "true" in this case - should we let logic declare it outlawed from the range of truths? Should we look for empirical claims about reality which we can verify by contrasting the actual world and the world of the fiction? And if we are being very serious about this, claiming that it is literally truths we are talking about, can we accept the verdict of literature dealing with truths only in a metaphorical sense?

I wish to suggest that literary works do contain and express truths about

human beings and human life, and that they are truths which neither present us with problems of verification nor stretch the logical use of the word truth.

Let us consider a work of literature. What does *Anna Karenina* tell us about human life, what are the truths it contains, expresses, shows us?

Monroe Beardsley¹ would say, the work consists of predications that can be divided into two classes: reports and reflections, the former ones giving us the story and latter ones giving us the author's generalizations on the basis of the story. The reflections of the author would for Beardsley be the implicit truth-claims of the work. But what Beardsley doesn't tell us is how we are going to differentiate between these two; where does the limit go between what belongs to the story, and what belongs to the mouth of the author reflecting on his own story? The difficulty in isolating the reflections of the author is on the level of deciding whether the dialogue belongs to the story, whether the things said in discussion between the fictitious characters should be taken as reports only, whether some major character's thoughts can be taken as reflections or as constitutive of the story told. Moreover, this way of looking at *Anna Karenina* would be to reduce Tolstoy's work to a make-believe story together with the author's didactic commentary on it. Do we have any reason to think that Tolstoy meant it to be read this way? Is not the whole work expressive of how Tolstoy saw human life? Is it not the work as a whole that gives us the feeling of having been shown profound truths of human beings, their weaknesses and their moments of grandeur, their capacity for selfishness and for generosity, their dilemmas in dealing with emotions and duties?

It would be very hard to extract these descriptions from the work by way of isolating the reflections of the author, provided that these reflections could be identified somehow: the sentences of the work ought to come with their function on their faces, so to speak. Needless to say, they don't.

Furthermore, if the reflections of the author are to be taken as empirical truth-claims about the world, Beardsley ought to give us a recipe for testing these claims for their truth-value. It is unclear how this could be done. This method of arriving at the truths the work contains seems to me not only practically impossible but also a truncation of the work.

What about a view that deems truth superfluous to the aesthetic understanding of the work? Stein Haugom Olsen² has suggested that truth is not integral to our reading of a work of literature, as we do not turn to literary works for information. He makes a distinction between informative and literary

¹ Beardsley, M.C.: *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York 1958, pp. 400-453.

² Haugom Olsen, Stein: *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, Cambridge 1978, pp. 46-81.

discourses, and deems literature a poor source of insights in the informative sense. Going against the conception of literature as something which is intended to "enlighten and convince" the reader, Haugom Olsen turns the issue around: not because it doesn't embody truths is literature deemed a poor source of valuable insights, but because it is not the type of discourse aimed at producing such insights.

According to Haugom Olsen, the notion of truth has no meaning apart from a practice in which there is a method of verification, and a practice of debate is presupposed for a standard of agreement. In other words, the truths in a literary work can not be assessed in any way as the practice of confirming truth-claims doesn't apply to literary discourse.

And I quote: "/.../ literary discourse cannot be interpreted as being intended to inform, and (that) judgements about the truth or falsity of literary works are therefore inappropriate and, indeed, meaningless."³ Also, he maintains that if a literary work can be seen as made up of singular statements about particular events, and of general statements about experience, the singular statements in it will turn out to be untrue, and the general statements will be vague or trivial, or controversial.

What I take him to be saying is that truth is only relevant to informative discourse. This notion tolerates a closer scrutiny.

Where does the notion of truth come into our lives? The first instance could be when we as children are encouraged to tell the truth in some matter, in a situation where the possibility of telling a lie arises. Gradually the concept and the practice of truth-telling will be extended to cover a wide range of instances and the general principle of truthfulness will emerge. It is not by being given a definition of truth that we learn how to use the word, but the meaning and application of the concept will be learnt in different situations in our lives. We learn to understand what it means not to cheat in a game, following the rules being the specific form of truthfulness in games. The concept of truth and trueness comes into the picture in all our activities and all our relations to other people - we learn to apply different criteria for it in different contexts. Thus we know what it means to be a true friend, what true love is, what the truth sought for in a court of law means. The criteria for truth in different contexts vary greatly, and we do not apply the strict rules of logic, the demand of necessary and sufficient conditions, in every instance where we talk about truth. The one common denominator for all instances where we apply the concepts of truth and true is the role truth has for us, the importance of it in

³ *Ibid.*, p.58.

all these different connections. The possibility of making the distinction between truth and falsehood is what counts, not the conditions we set up for truth.

This is where we can bring literature back into the picture. What does *Anna Karenina* tell us, what are the truths we find in it? I suggest it brings out many central features of what it is like to live a human life. It shows us how we, through weakness of will, through lack of compassion and through the helplessness of our hearts can inflict pain on other people, can destroy our own lives and the lives of our beloved ones. This is what I would call a profound truth of human life, and I fail to see how any other form of discourse, to borrow Haugom Olsen's term, could bring these aspects of our lives to us in a more forceful way, or how any other form of discourse could produce a deeper insight into these issues. Literature is not intended to inform us, but it is certainly a source of valuable insights. Whether or not we accept the things we are made aware of in literary works as truths is a question of our attitude to the issues the work brings to us, not a question of a logical impossibility of truth in fiction. To maintain that literature cannot embody or express truths is to refuse its value as a unique mirror of our human lives, and to see these truths as empirical claims about the world, claims that can be verified, is to ignore the fact that insight is not something we wish to verify. Seeing the truth in literary works is acknowledging the central role of truth in our lives.