

Editorial: Frontiers in the Philosophy of Literature

Søren Harnow Klausen

This special issue of *Res Cogitans* presents a selection of the papers presented at the conference *Frontiers in the philosophy of literature*, which was held at the University of Southern Denmark, Odense from 25-26th September 2015. The conference was funded by the Danish Research Council for Independence Research – Humanities and hosted by the Department for the Study of Culture. It focused three interrelated topics that are both more or less perennial questions in the philosophy of literature and at the same time have attracted renewed attention, and received important modifications, in light of recent developments in literature, philosophy and society at large.

One group of papers dealt with the notion and function of *authorship*. The role and status of the author has been a central topic in the philosophy of literature for decades. While the discussion was spurred by provocative writings of Barthes and Foucault in the late 1960ies, it goes back at least to debates surrounding New Criticism and the later controversy over the role of authorial intentions in interpretation prompted by Gadamer's hermeneutics. However, the problem has gained a new significance due to the emergence of new semi-biographical genres. For example, Karl Ove Knausgård's six-volume novel *My Struggle* has given rise to extensive debates about both the ethical obligations of the author towards the real-life people dealt with in her works and the relationship between fictive and non-fictive works (see (3)). The relationship between a philosopher's work and life has also been a central issue in recent discussions about scholarship in the history of philosophy. Another development that has given renewed importance to the question of the role of the author is the trend towards increased *co-authorship*. While this trend is most vivid in non-fictional literature (e.g. scientific papers), it raises questions that are relevant to literary fiction as well. Joint authorship raises legal and ethical questions (e.g. about responsibility for the views – and possible mistakes or fraud – expressed in a text, or about intellectual property rights). These in turn point back to questions about the relationship between intentions (collective as

Søren Harnow Klausen
Institut for Kulturvidenskaber
Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M
E-Mail: harnow@sdu.dk

well as individual, tacit as well as explicit), the writing process, textual and literature features, and reader responses, known from the philosophy of literature and interpretation.

In his keynote talk “Ten Theses of Literary Interpretation”, Peter Lamarque dismissed the notion of meaning as being much less relevant to literary interpretation than is usually assumed, while still defending the general view that an author’s intentions are important to the understanding of a literary work. In contrast, Klausen’s paper “Levels of Literary Meaning” (Klausen 2017) explored the different ways in which intentions might, according to him, determine literary meaning, arguing that proponents of intentionalism have been insufficiently attentive to the different levels of literary intention and meaning. Paisley Livingston’s keynote talk on authorship and creativity aimed at dissociating the latter from stronger normative notions. The concept of creativity was also dealt with by Catrin Misselhorn, who in her keynote talk emphasized the potential of literature and philosophy for conceptual development.

A second group of papers dealt with the issue of *ethics and literature*. Spearheaded by Booth and Nussbaum, the ethical approach to literature has become increasingly popular during the last decade. But how exactly can literary fiction be ethically significant? Does literary fiction support certain types of ethical theory (like situationism) more than others? Examining the relationship between literature and ethics is also relevant to the understanding and assessment of a wide variety of currents in critical literary scholarship, e.g. feminist, queer or post-colonialist approaches, which, though not overtly ethical, nevertheless exploit the links between normative evaluation and aesthetic criticism. The paper by Leander Göttcke entitled “How (Not) to Justify Ethical Criticism” connects the question about the legitimacy of ethical criticism to the “implied author” (thus also addressing (1)), as he argues that its relevance is partly determined by the degree to which the implied author is committed to the values expressed in her work. Mette Blok shows how the work of Stanley Cavell, which she locates in the field between philosophy and literature, can be seen as representing a dynamic, perfectionist approach to morality. Blok argues that it, partly because of its connection to the literary

tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, is able to counteract the otherwise strong tendency of morality to stagnate and turn into moralism.

A third group of papers discussed problems relating to *fiction and truth*. Part of the motive behind the recent interest in literary fiction among philosophers is an assumption that it can be an important source of knowledge, which can qualify philosophical discussions. This raises the general question about the relationship between fiction and truth or reality (implicit also in discussions about the role of the author and the moral significance of literature). In what (if any) sense can literary fiction be said make statements or present evidence or arguments? Does it convey knowledge about the possible rather than the actual? When and how far can literature be trusted? What are the conditions and criteria of literary trustworthiness?

In “Truth and Fiction Reconsidered”, Christer Nyberg argues that some notion of truth is necessary in order to understand fiction and the possibility of more or less enlightened judgments of matters presented in, or pertaining to literature), but that a minimalist, contextualist notion suffices. William Melaney examines Jacques Rancière’s interpretation of Proust, according to which Proust’s fictive language at first creates a distance between the reader and reality, but only to introduce a new sense of the world and thus re-establish a connection to reality. Bianca Bellini explores a similar idea in her paper “Literary Experience as (Visual) Experience of Literary Worlds”. Drawing on phenomenology, she describes the building and unfolding of literary worlds in the reading process and then shows how the reader’s experience of these worlds can foster an insight into the modifiability of the real world, and affect our judgments about – and so be a genuine source of knowledge. Proust is also the topic of Helle Munkholm Davidsen’s “The Literary Representation of Reality”. Davidsen argues that represents reality both through specific representations of the perceived world and by highlighting the interaction between perception and conceptual understanding.

All the papers in this thematic section thus defend the idea of a qualified, more or less indirect, but still substantial (or, in the case of Nyberg’s minimalism, at least significant) relation between literature and the real world, and of literature as a potential source of knowledge of the world – and/or our

relation to it. The concluding keynote talk by R. Lanier Anderson, on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, explored the peculiar literary world presented by this work, focusing on the extraordinary (and not so extraordinary) powers and qualities of its protagonist.

In "Knowledge and Ethics in Literature", Bjørn Rabjerg effectively connects the three main topics of the conference. Focusing on Knausgård's paradigmatically autofictional novel *My Struggle*, and drawing on the philosophy of K. E. Løgstrup, Rabjerg argues that fiction can provide ethical knowledge in a way that especially emphasizes the author's worldview and particular aesthetic choices, and the element of communication between author and reader. A similar connection – albeit seen from a more critical perspective – is examined in Nils Gunder Hansen's "The Question of Unreliability in Autobiographical Narration". Hansen argues that the ethical response to a text is conditioned by its "degree of fictionality", and discusses which kind of "truthfulness" can be expected from a more or less fictional work. He also considers how the reader might balance the strong emotional appeal of the first-person narrator against a concern for the views and interests of other persons mentioned in the story (a question which is also very pertinent to Knausgård's work).

A different kind of connection between authorship and the epistemic potential and shortcomings is explored by Benjamin Boysen in "Poetry, Philosophy and Madness in Plato". Boysen argues that contrary to Plato's official view, philosophy – as understood by Plato himself – resembles poetry in being both creative and passively receptive.

If a general lesson could be taken from all these contributions and discussions, it must be that contemporary philosophy of literature is fairly optimistic about the prospects for gaining knowledge – not least, but not only ethical knowledge – from fiction, but that it is likely to be knowledge of a rather special kind, and that the relationship between the knowledge communicated and the fictional work is highly complex. In any case, the discussions at the conference and the papers demonstrated very clearly that the topics are closely entangled: The ethical significance of literature depends on its epistemic powers, and both depend on the practice and intentions of the author and her interaction with the reader.

References

Klausen, S. H. 2017. "Levels of Literary Meaning". *Philosophy and Literature* 41, 70-90