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Pre-Modern Philosophical Views on Reality and Truth in Literature

Abstract

The views of the writers outlined and examined here show that a philosophical approach is unavoidably in a contrasting position in relation to literary ways of representing reality and truth in literature. The specific domain of philosophical reflection is to clarify concepts through deductive methods or a purely rational viewpoint, whereas literature is based on the experience of life stories in concrete circumstances. The prospect of our dealing with sacred and secular literary texts is to disclose literary ways of observing and expressing reality and truth in its most elementary form of life. In all times we can observe the need to convey sense-experience and to evoke ethical reflection by using a more suitable mode of expression with an eye to the larger structures of literary representation of reality and truth. Literature deals with representation of life in all its contrasting manifestations in persuasive literary forms and is therefore intrinsically connected with the issues of aesthetics. Ethical sensibility, meanwhile, works best when dealing with particular persons in specific contexts. Works of literature combine the particular and the general in concrete life situations and in individual characters.

Key words

literary criticism, literature, philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, reality, truth

Introduction

In ancient philosophy there are two main realms of reflection: study of nature and of the world (as Aristotle preferred), and reflection on human self and identity, as Plato and his immediate and later followers practiced. Plato held that the body and soul are two distinct types of being, while Aristotle insisted on the inner connection between the human's corporeal and the incorporeal aspects. Nevertheless, both parties agreed that philosophy was not a mere abstract intellectual discipline but pertained directly to life, to the search for truth and happiness. Classical texts became fundamental sources that have exercised great influence up to the present. They represent original value-laden views and beliefs that have been exposed throughout centuries to ever new re-evaluation on the bases of sense-perception, practice and experience.

Since antiquity literature has been considered a particular kind of imitation (*mimesis*). Friedrich Schiller distinguished between imitation of nature and imitation of human emotion (Schiller 1981). Imitation of nature is the subject of naïve art, whereas imitation of human emotion is that of sentimental art. Both types of literature combine an analytical and a synthetic way of presentation, and both tend also to consider tradition while also remaining open to innovation. However, this is true of all sciences, cultures and religions. Certain basic themes and forms are present in the literature of all times and

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cultures. A comparative treatment of literary texts leads to discovering the contrasting relation of similarities and differences between authors, cultures and periods. Some foundational values were adopted in Europe from ancient Greece and Rome, and some from the ancient Middle East and Israel. One pair of common themes is longing and temptation (Avsenik Nabergoj 2009 and 2010), and in this regard Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a common heritage of biblical sources (Kvam et al. 1999; Volf et al. 2010).

Since nature has always been the basic model for imitation, it has, simultaneously, also been the basis of the criteria for judging truth, accordingly, objective reality. The human spirit shone also in the searching for a common core within the myriad phenomena in the material world. Already in ancient times people began to unveil the workings of natural law, and so it was that natural law later also entered consciousness as a concept. The poet and the scientist co-existed and co-created in harmony, as both were seeking the common core of the phenomenal world, each in his own way. The polymath Goethe is among the most leading spokesmen for the harmony between external and internal order in man's understanding of truth.

With this the nature of the universal dimension did not lose validity but in fact became more valuable. The increasingly necessary perspective of man's creative world into the internal world of the soul entailed a broadening of possible viewpoints for judging objective reality, and at the same time this reality became an image of or symbol for portraying especially the inexpressible shades of man's psychology and spirituality. Art and science developed according to the principle of analogy, and in the area of philosophy the concept of the "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) appeared. It became all the more obvious that literature is an organic link between objective and subjective truth which could only be expressed by means of a symbol, by analogy. Literary critics speak in theoretical terms of the ambiguity of symbols, words and word chains, and ultimately of hermeneutic theory examining the literal meaning and the various aspects of metaphorical meaning. In this fact lies also the reason for the tremendous significance of symbol and allegory. The essence of a symbol is that rather than offering an immediate way of representing truth it provides an analogous representation of truth. In maxims 279 and 314, Goethe (1999) offered the following, now seminal, distinction between symbol and allegory:

"There is a great difference whether a poet is looking for the particular that goes with the general, or sees the general in the particular. The first gives rise to allegory where the particular only counts as an example, an illustration of the particular; but the latter in fact constitutes the nature of poetry, expressing something particular without any thought of the general, and without indicating it. Now whoever has this living grasp of the particular is at the same time in possession of the general, without realizing it, or else only realizing it later on." (Maxim 279)

"This is true symbolism, where the particular represents the general, not as dream and shadow, but as a live and immediate revelation of the unfathomable." (Maxim 314)

When the organic and creative linking of objective and subjective reality in art becomes the subject of analytical judgement and philosophical discourse, abstract systems inevitably follow. Systems like idealism, realism, materialism, and so on have little to do with reality per se. Abstract constructs are made, constructs that the best creators in the area of the arts as well as the sciences transcend; those who are capable of doing so pour masses of objective reality and subjective impressions into a created whole. Because one cannot speak of truth without ethical awareness and judgement, the terms reality and truth are not synonymous: whereas the word reality implies ethical neutrality,

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this is not the case for the word truth. Thus, the two concepts come simultaneously to the fore and organically supplement each other when a creative and well-meaning intellect is at work, but they clash when immaterial judging of one and the other occurs. Literature is the primary realm of creativity, education, and scientific clarification of truth at the individual and social levels.

Immanuel Kant's crucial distinction between "pure" and "practical" reason offered contemporary and later generations of philosophers a holistic model for linking objective reality and personal life experiences that included the moral imperative. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains the means of conceptual understanding in the area of actual or possible empirical experience. Pure reason is, when it comes to empirical experience, especially cognizant of uniting "the whole" and developing conceptual arguments for communication at both the abstract and systematic levels. This capability, however, in no way suffices or serves man's experience in the objective world, where man freely conceives of the moral imperative, dramatic ethical challenges as the basic guide for his dignity, and manifests his ethical sense of the beautiful and the sublime as well as, ultimately, his natural inclination for a goal (*telos*), while sensing absolute reality and truth. This area of human understanding and communication was dealt with by Kant in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. The world of nature and the world of man's freedom are two separate entities, although they are organically interwoven in material life. This distinction makes possible the discovery of the foundation of the traditional theological "negative path" (*via negativa*) and "negative capability," which the poet John Keats highlighted in connection with the experience of man's uncertainty, his doubts, and incapability of bringing his experiences about the mystical, the sublime and the profound into line with conceptual and systematised categories.

1. Reality in pre-modern philosophical reflection on art

The first great author of antique literary theory is Plato (c. 427–c. 347 BC), whose dialogues present insights on topics fundamental to human existence: the nature of being; epistemology; the proper ordering of human society; the nature of justice, truth, good, love, and beauty. Though there are grounds for believing that at least some of the viewpoints on these issues had been cultivated long before Plato, he developed them fully and thereby founded a tradition that had a great influence on all later periods to the present. Among all antique authors it was Plato who most radically and universally discussed the power and powerlessness to express reality and truth in the arts and especially in literature. Because he judged poetry negatively in terms of its ability to mediate truth and its educational roles, authors from Aristotle, to Philip Sidney, to Aphra Behn, to Percy Bysshe Shelley have written defences of poetry. Among contemporary philosophers who confronted Plato's position, Jacques Derrida in particular should be mentioned. Given the extensive reach and influence of Plato's views on art and especially literature, we devote a fair amount of attention to it here, while quoting crucial passages from Books II, III, VII, and X of his *Republic*.

In *Writing and Difference* (1967), Jacques Derrida points out the difference between Greek and Hebrew thinking in connection with textual interpretation. Characteristic of Greek philosophy is a search for a rational explanation of the universe in the sense of searching for universal, general, unambiguous, and thus concrete and stable principles. For this reason, the main issue of

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Greek philosophy is the explanation of the relation between the ideal world and the concrete, material, objective world. For Hebrew-Jewish thought, it is the comprehension of material in its ambiguity and opposites that is characteristic, which is why interpreters promote interpretations of literature that have several meanings. This principle allows for a positive evaluation of the tradition of interpretation in the search for truth as mediated by texts. Thus, in Judaism – in addition to the canonical texts themselves – the tradition of text interpretation has a very important role. A tendency of Jewish hermeneutics is for the interpreter to see in the text and in its interpretation a single approach to searching for various significant viewpoints. In the broader Christianity of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the mixed Greek and Jewish influence was felt in all areas of science and art. Saint Jerome was among the first to acknowledge clearly the advantage of the Jewish interpretative approach. In his translation of and commentaries to the Bible, he advocates the principle of "Hebrew truth" (*Hebraica veritas*). Jewish interpreters of the Bible, who in France and in Spain had written a number of commentaries on the Biblical books, developed a particular hermeneutical method and saw in the literal meaning (*peshat*) various viewpoints of figurative meaning. With this, the Jewish tradition of literary criticism came very close to the Christian tradition, which reaches back to the 4th century, when John Cassian (360–435) became the first to develop a system of interpretation on the basis of the four meanings of the Bible. Augustine (354–430) established the foundations for a system of Biblical exegesis with his theory of signs in connection with a theory of language that differentiates between natural and conventional signs. On the basis of the literal meaning a system for the various viewpoints of allegorical interpretation opens up. In the 12th century, this system reached the peak of its popularity through a work by Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141) entitled *Didascalicon*. Hugh established a leading school in Paris, which in the explanation of all fundamental questions combined the external and internal experience of human recognition. (Kamin 1991: 12–26) Adherents of the system of allegorical explanation on the basis of the literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*) also included the philosopher Thomas Aquinas and the poet Dante, two of the system's most prominent proponents.

In the 12th century, Jewish thought was most significantly marked in all regards and for many years by the leading Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135–1204). He was born in Muslim Cordoba in Spain near the end of the *convivencia* period among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam which had characterised the period from the 8th to the 12th century. When Maimonides was thirteen years old, Cordoba was overtaken by a fundamentalist Muslim sect (Almohads), and he and his family had to go into exile. They went first to Pez in Morocco, later to Palestine, and then to Egypt; Maimonides died in Cairo and was finally buried in Palestine. The great thinker strove to harmonise faith with philosophical rationality, and Judaism with the Aristotelianism which was experiencing a resurgence at that time. He wanted to show that Judaism was in accordance with physics and mathematics as understood by Aristotle's 12th century adherents. Direct contact with Jews, with Christians, and with Muslims was what accounted for Maimonides' general erudition and education, and his ideas had a tremendous influence on all three groups. A great proponent and supporter of a revival of Aristotle's philosophy and literary theory in Europe, he also greatly influenced scholastic philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

Like Augustine, Maimonides used an allegorical interpretation of the Bible and developed both theoretical and practical interpretation on the basis of

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selected biblical texts, which he employed as models to explain his literary theories. He selected a series of ambiguous "termini" and "parables" and "figurative uses, exaggerations and hyperboles" and included them as examples in his philosophical explanation. In this way he wished to respond to the challenge of the era in which he lived, when the popularity of neo-Aristotelian philosophy gave the impression that Aristotelian philosophy and literal exegeses of biblical texts were at odds or even contradictory. He wished to prove that a harmony existed between philosophy and biblical truth. Maimonides took into consideration the degrees of education among people and used the method of the dual role of interpretation of selected texts: for the masses, which lacked adequate knowledge for understanding the content in the linguistic and literary forms of the text, he concealed that content; to those who were capable of understanding texts, he unveiled it. Through interpretation he did not intend to mediate a complete and clear explanation of words or entire biblical passages, but merely to intimate their hidden meaning. On the basis of these intimations, the reader had to complete the interpretative process and arrive at the recognition that the inner meanings of texts were of a philosophical nature. Maimonides's stance was that the meaning of biblical texts could only be grasped by a complete, virtuous individual who, having been led by various apparent contradictions into a state of confusion, sought an exit from this confusion. *Mishneh Torah* or Repetition of the Torah, his first great work, was a discussion of interpretation; this was to be a complete statement of rabbinical law. It was his experiences of perplexity on account of the contradictions in biblical texts that gave rise to his second fundamental work, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1190). Originally written in Arabic, this work was soon translated into Hebrew and Latin. In this work, Maimonides discusses original biblical texts and their interpretations as two viewpoints of a single revelation that remains open to multiple meanings.

In the introduction to the first part of *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides elucidates his method of interpretation. He departs from the observation that even educated individuals well-versed in the traditions of both the Jewish faith and philosophy find themselves in a state of "perplexity" because they do not take into account the ambiguity of biblical language and the biblical use of perplexing parables. His thesis is that a profound understanding of the meaning of the Bible and the Talmud requires an elaborated method of interpretation. The author differentiates between "natural science" (physics) and "divine science" (metaphysics), and finds that the "inner" meaning of the text sometimes pertains to one (for example in the description of the world's beginnings in Genesis), and sometimes the other (for example the description of the Chariot of Ezekiel). He explains the obscure aspects of parables and termini that we find in the "books of the Prophets." The most important biblical texts contain words that are difficult to comprehend on account of their multiplicity of meaning, and in addition to that the meaning is extended by other words; we find also examples of texts that have now one, now another meaning. At the conclusion of the introduction he explains the seven causes of contradictions, showing that they are only apparent contradictions.[1]

1

For an exhaustive presentation of Maimonides' literary theory in the broader academic and cultural context of his time, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, "The Philosophical Exegesis." In *Hebrew Bible /Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Ed. Magne Sæbø. Volume I/2: Middle Ages. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000, 302–320.

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Maimonides' thought and method of interpreting are in many ways a continu-
ation of the interpretative principles and practices of his illustrious predeces-
sor Rashi (Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105), who commented in Hebrew on the
entire Old Testament Talmud. Both strongly influenced the development of
Jewish and Christian Medieval exegetic methods, including those of Thomas
Aquinas, who in his magnum opus *Summa Theologica* (I, 1, 9–10) develops
an argument on the use of metaphor and ambiguous words in the Bible. (A
section of this study is devoted to Aquinas, and his work is also quoted at
some length.) Modern criticism by Sigmund Freud, Erich Auerbach, Harold
Bloom, and Jacques Derrida, among others, has indicated familiarity with and
appreciation of Maimonides' theories and interpretative methods.

1.1. Plato's bases for recognising and expressing reality
and truth in philosophy and in literature

Unlike Aristotle in his *Poetics*, Plato did not write a systematic literary theory.
He dealt with poetry in the broader framework of discussion on the funda-
mental philosophical questions. Characteristic of Plato's views on poetics
is that they are a logical consequence of his philosophy's idealistic starting
points, which is why he is not favourable to the imitation or mimesis which
was the basis of Aristotle's literary theory as well as his yardstick for evaluat-
ing reality and truth. Plato's starting point is a statement on the existence of
eternal and universal ideas, which he calls forms. Poetry, with its linguistic
and symbolic structures, is a mere copy of the material, physical world, and
thus a mere copy of a copy of ideas, which is why it cannot lead one to truth;
on the contrary, it distances the individual from truth. Forms are unchanging
entities, to which the world of individual, changeable objects are subordinate.
Because forms are eternal and unchanging, they are more real than the mate-
rial world, which is mutable. Above all forms or ideas Plato placed the form
of the good, which is the divine cause of the world and which is characteristic
for being and allows for an understanding of the world as a whole. In accord-
ance with this highest truth and value, Plato demands that literature have an
edifying function, that it serve a moral and social role, and that it teach good-
ness and grace.

Plato's dialogues are not constructed in a manner that leads the argument to
an unambiguously expressed conclusion. There are, however, passages that
summarise a topic in concentrated form, and at the appropriate moment Plato
encompasses a dialogue in concentrated definitions or explanations. Book II
of *Republic* is an attempt to illustrate the path to truth and justice for the indi-
vidual and the state. In accordance with his premise that the good is truly good
– that is, since the good is truly good, we love it for its own sake – Plato shows
in the dialogue between Adeimantus and Socrates the tragic contradiction be-
tween the just, who live genuinely and in accordance with good that we desire
for its own sake, and the unjust, "who practise justice […] involuntarily and
because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine
something of this kind" (359b).

Plato then finds fault with poets, actors and prophets who depict justice ac-
cording to the whims of public opinion and present as just that which is only
apparently or seemingly just. Plato, in the persona of Socrates, responds to
this error by transferring the weight of the investigation of justice and the
explanation of the meaning of life from external criteria into human innerness
and lays bare the essence of his discourse:

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"Now as you have admitted that justice is one of that highest class of goods which are desired indeed for their results, but in a far greater degree for their own sakes – like sight or hearing or knowledge or health, or any other real and natural and not merely conventional good – I would ask you in your praise of justice to regard one point only: I mean the essential good and evil which justice and injustice work in the possessors of them. Let others praise justice and censure injustice, magnifying the rewards and honours of the one and abusing the other…" (367c–367d)

In Books II, III, and X of *Republic*, Plato casts a critical eye over the role of poets. And yet this critical evaluation does not mean that Plato, as a matter of principle, put into opposition nature and the role of philosophy versus poetry and that he, as a matter of principle, denied poetry any legitimacy. A close reading reveals that Plato admitted the positive nature and possibly positive educational role of all types and genres of art, even as he refused to allow artists unlimited freedom in their presenting of the fundamental reality and truth about the world, life, the gods and people. If Plato, in connection with art, cites various errant ways, it cannot be overlooked that he also points out many errors among philosophers. His concern is the good of the state as a whole and it is in the interest of this good that he declares that artists' freedom must be limited (377b–383c).

1.2. Plato's criticism of poets' depictions of nature and divine and human behaviour

In Book III of *Republic*, Plato continues his critique of how poets depict the nature and actions of both divine heroes and human heroes, who appear also as demigods. At times he sums up his stance by means of synthetic explanation. For example, in 387b, after having furnished examples of the underworld and slavery, he states:

"And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages, not because they are un-poetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because the greater the poetical charm of them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men who are meant to be free, and who should fear slavery more than death."

In 388c, after providing some questionable literary examples, he concludes, "But if he must introduce the gods, at any rate let him not dare so completely to misrepresent the greatest of the gods" by having him pronounce unseemly words. In 389b, he states, "Again, truth should be highly valued." He then takes up the cause of demigods:

"And let us equally refuse to believe, or allow to be repeated, the tale of Theseus son of Poseidon, or of Peirithous son of Zeus, going forth as they did to perpetrate a horrid rape; or of any other hero or son of a god daring to do such impious and dreadful things as they falsely ascribe to them in our day: and let us further compel the poets to declare either that these acts were not done by them, or that they were not the sons of gods; – both in the same breath they shall not be permitted to affirm. We will not have them trying to persuade our youth that the gods are the authors of evil, and that heroes are no better than men – sentiments which, as we were saying, are neither pious nor true, for we have already proved that evil cannot come from the gods." (391c–391d)

From 386a Plato provides guidelines regarding content and the question of forms that are appropriate for portraying characteristics of the gods and humans. The principle of probability of imitation dictates to him the conclusion that the literary genres of tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry call for different ways of imitating; the actor cannot effectively imitate reality if he attempts to do so according to the demands of two or more literary genres.

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In the subsequent passage, Plato substantiates his belief that artists should avoid imitating ignoble characters such as slaves, and especially avoid base or lowly characteristics:

"Did you never observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind?" (395d).

The poet should refrain from portraying negative characteristics, as he "will disdain such a person" (396d). Of those who are opposed to the need to imitate only good characters, he says there are unscrupulous types who embrace that which is unworthy and base (397a).

Plato then introduces his interlocutor to the basic three ingredients of any song or poem – the words, the melody, and the rhythm – and to the important educational role of art in general. (401b–402a) Universal harmony is ultimately the highest ideal for humanity. Halfway through Book III, Plato asks rhetorically:

"And when a beautiful soul harmonises with a beautiful form, and the two are cast in one mould, that will be the fairest of sights to him who has an eye to see it?" (402d)

The most beautiful is also the most deserving of love, and "true love is a love of beauty and order – temperate and harmonious" (402e). Everything that is musical must culminate in the love of beauty, even as, in connection with the relation between a healthy body and a healthy mind, he states, "not that the good body by any bodily excellence improves the soul, but, on the contrary, that the good soul, by her own excellence, improves the body as far as this may be possible" (403d). The power of the mind is also a necessary condition for the good doctor. (408d)

1.3. The real world and the world of the senses as well as the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry"

At the beginning of Book VII of *Republic*, Plato uses his allegory of the cave or "underground den" to illustrate his doctrine of the opposition between the world of the senses, or shadows of reality, and the world of ideas or real things, among which the good is the most illuminated. In this context Plato also emphasizes the educational intent of arts and sciences.

Plato's understanding of the opposition between the world of ideas, which represent real things, and the world of the senses, which are only shadows of the real world of ideas or forms, is in Book X of *Republic* the basis for his exhaustive explanation of artistic genres and means of imitation reality, which is necessarily beyond reach. He begins by speaking of the "rule about poetry" (595a) and through the conversation with Glaucon he articulates his profound distrust of poets (595b). Plato then leads his interlocutor to the essence of his argument, namely that no work of art, whatever its genre, can express reality and truth, as it is only a third degree imitation. Plato departs from the ideal form of individual objects and infers that God, as a true creator, makes everything according to a single fundamental form, and for this reason created things are not real but only appearances of reality. This makes it all the more clear that a carpenter, a painter, or a poet cannot create works that are real and true, or that represent reality and truth (597a–598b).

Plato now turns to "the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head" and emphasizes that their works are "but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities" (599a). The discussion of the impos-

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sibility that the work of artisans and artists might accurately represent reality is especially problematical when Plato touches on the most difficult problem of human life: the secrets of the human soul. He departs from the experience of contradictions in man's soul in relation to reason and says:

"… painting or drawing, and imitation in general, when doing their own proper work, are far removed from truth, and the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no true or healthy aim" (603a–603b).

The essence of poetry is that it "imitates the actions of men, whether voluntary or involuntary, on which, as they imagine, a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly" – and Plato then asks rhetorically, "Is there anything more?" Plato believes that for the "the just man […] even when he is in poverty or sickness, or any other seeming misfortune, all things will in the end work together for good to him in life and death" (613a). Hard strokes of fate are for every person fundamental experiences of control through reason, for, while the "principle of law and reason […] bids him resist," there is a simultaneous "feeling of his misfortune which is forcing him to indulge his sorrow" (604b). From this it follows logically that there must be "two distinct principles" at work in the human soul (604c). The passage about the dramatic struggle in the human soul is thus a unique contribution to the concept of the human soul.

Plato clearly states his reservations about poetry and its limits. He believes that a painter, whose work is a mere copy of nature, is unable to say anything essential or anything akin to what is real. For this reason, the painter submits to the visible appearance if, for example, he paints a chair in perspective. In section 6 of Book X, Plato says that what poets put forth "is very far removed from the truth" (605c).

Plato's negative assessment of poetry in Book X of *Republic* leads him to the conclusion that poetry should be banished by law on account of "the power which poetry has of harming even the good (and there are very few who are not harmed)" (605c). Nevertheless, Plato differentiates between the positive and negative views of imitation in literature, saying with regard to the negative viewpoints, "let this our defence serve to show the reasonableness of our former judgment in sending away out of our State an art having the tendencies which we have described;" he does, however, state that poetry may "be allowed to return from exile" on condition "that she make a defence of herself in lyrical or some other metre" (607d). Especially in modern society this stance gives rise to wonder and exasperation. It also disturbed Leo Tolstoy, who otherwise looked negatively on most literature created after the Renaissance. Tolstoy, too, believes that morally corrupt literature can do great harm; this harm is, in his view, much greater than the harm that banishing literature could cause. The basis of his stance is his fundamental principle that the essential quality of art is not an imitation of the beautiful and transmitting "a certain kind of pleasure," but the experiencing and mediating of emotions. In Chapter 5 of *What Is Art?*, he concludes:

"Some teachers of mankind – as Plato in his *Republic* and people such as the primitive Christians, the strict Mohammedans, and the Buddhists – have gone so far as to repudiate all art.

People viewing art in this way (in contradiction to the prevalent view of today which regards any art as good if only it affords pleasure) considered, and consider, that art (as contrasted with speech, which need not be listened to) is so highly dangerous in its power to infect people against their wills that mankind will lose far less by banishing all art than by tolerating each and every art.

Evidently such people were wrong in repudiating all art, for they denied that which cannot be denied – one of the indispensable means of communication, without which mankind could not

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exist. But not less wrong are the people of civilized European society of our class and day in favoring any art if it but serves beauty, i.e., gives people pleasure.

Formerly people feared lest among the works of art there might chance to be some causing corruption, and they prohibited art altogether. Now they only fear lest they should be deprived of any enjoyment art can afford, and patronize any art. And I think the last error is much grosser than the first and that its consequences are far more harmful." (Tolstoy 1996: 53–54)

2. Art and truth in older literary theory

Plato's and Aristotle's insights into literature and other arts have more or less uninterruptedly influenced the development of literature and literary theory to the present. Plato's fundamental differentiation of reality as a whole into the universal and eternal world of ideas or forms and the material world, which is only an imitation and thus a copy of the world of ideas that is only an apparent reflection of reality and truth, was extended by Aristotle in his theory of knowledge. It was later taken up by many others who wrote defences of language, poetry, and art in general: Horace (65–86 BC), Maimonides (1135–1204), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), Joachim du Bellay (c. 1522–1560), Philip Sidney (1554–1586), John Dryden (1631–1700), Alexander Pope (1688–1744), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822).[2]

2.1. Thomas Aquinas as an interpreter
of polysemous words and symbols

In his numerous wide-ranging philosophical writings Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) pursued a single important goal: to recognize reality and truth through reasoned reflection. Because he used biblical anthropology, philosophy, and theology as his starting point, he necessarily had to wrestle with fundamental questions on the nature of language and literature. He was very well-versed with the system of allegorical interpretation that dominated during the Middle Ages, with Plato's negative evaluation of artistic products as means of imitating reality, and with Aristotle's realism. His neo-Platonist contemporaries loyally followed Plato in relegating the material world to the transcendent world of ideas and forms. Interpreters of the Bible analogically placed the literal meaning of the Bible below the allegorical meaning. Through the new discovery of Aristotle in the 13th century, however, the manner of conceiving of and explaining religious and worldly texts changed. Thomas Aquinas was closer to Aristotle's realism than to Plato's idealism, which is why in his biblical exegeses he expressly emphasizes the advantage of the literal meaning, which corresponds to the author's intention; all viewpoints of allegorical or metaphorical meaning acquire their direction of pointing at the deeper meaning only on the basis of the text in its literal, linguistic, and literary embodiment. In his commentaries to many biblical books (Job, The Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and in his *Catena Aurea* on the Four Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul), Aquinas also took into consideration the individual style of the writer.

Thomas Aquinas, in his philosophical principles, addressed the question of how the indefiniteness of figurative language, such as poetic metaphors, accords with the conviction that language reliably allows for access to reality and truth. He solves the problem by acknowledging both the referential stability of linguistic and literary elements in the relation to reality and to truth, and the ambiguity of these elements, which already Augustine had addressed. Because he wished to interpret also the unclear and polysemous biblical passag-

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es, his explanation is essentially in harmony with the Medieval hermeneutic system, which defended the four semantic levels of a text: 1) the historical or literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*); 2) the allegorical meaning, which contains a hidden spiritual significance, while in Old Testament it entails, among other things, a pre-figuring of New Testament truth; 3) the tropological meaning, which transmit a moral message; 4) the anagogical meaning, which refers to eschatology. He explains these four levels systematically in his main work *Summa Theologica* I, Question 1, in Articles 9 and 10.

2.2. Dante and Boccaccio on dignity of literature

As a starting point, we should consider Dante, who presented his views on literary theory in two works: the philosophical *The Convivio* (The Banquet, 1306–1309), and the last of the thirteen Latin letters, in which Dante turns toward to his benefactor Cangrande I della Scala in dedicating the final part of the *Divine Comedy* to him. In the first chapter of Book II of *Il Convivio*, Dante, very much like Thomas Aquinas, speaks for the ambiguous (polyse-mous) role of words and figures of speech in literary texts. This four-tiered semantic viewpoint was universally accepted in the Middle Ages:

"The first is called the literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter, as in the fables of the poets. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. […] Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets.

The third sense is called moral, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils […]. The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is ex-pounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power. In this kind of explication, the literal should always come first, as being the sense in whose meaning the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to attend to the other senses, and especially the allegorical. It would be impossible because in everything that has an inside and an outside it is impossible to arrive at the inside without first arriving at the outside; consequently, since in what is written down the literal meaning is always the outside, it is impossible to arrive at the other senses, especially the allegorical, without first arriving at the literal." (qtd. in Leitch et al. 2010: 187–188)[3]

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), who, in addition to the *Decamerone* (1348–1353), wrote the extensive Latin encyclopaedic catalogue on pagan mythology *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (1348–1353), ranks among the most influential medieval literary theorists. In Books I–XIII, the author offers an allegorical explanation of Greek mythology, while Books XIV and XV consist of a passionate and stylistically engaging defence of poets, who after Plato's negative evaluation of their manner of imitating reality in *Republic* had endured everything from shallow and often boorish barbs to aggressive attacks on their livelihood. Boccaccio became, alongside Plato writing on po-etry and alongside the Aristotle of the *Poetics*, the most influential literary

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2
Many of their works of literary theory are presented in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Leitch et al. 2010: 2010).

3
Leitch et al. quote extensively from Richard H. Lansing's translation of *Il Convivio*.

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theorist of the Renaissance. In Book XIV, Chapter 5, he speaks of the mockery, the accusations and denunciations suffered by poets. As he observes, poets are accused of being "seducers of the mind, prompters of crime," and thus in his defence of poetry he "cannot look for a milder sentence from them than in their rage they thunder down upon poets" (qtd. in Leitch et al. 2010: 195).[4] In Chapter 7, the author explains the nature, source, and role of poetry, stating that it stems from Divine inspiration and that "true poets have always been the rarest of men." His definition of poetry is:

"This fervor of poesy is sublime in its effects: it impels the soul to a longing for utterance; it brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind; it arranges these meditations in a fixed order, adorns the whole composition with unusual interweaving of words and thoughts; and thus it veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction. Further, if in any case the invention so requires, it can arm kings, marshal them for war, launch whole fleets from their docks, nay, counterfeit sky, land, sea, adorn young maidens with flowery garlands, portray human character in its various phases, awake the idle, stimulate the dull, restrain the rash, subdue the criminal, and distinguish excellent men with their proper meed of praise: these, and many other such, are the effects of poetry." (Leitch et al. 2010: 195–196)

In Chapter 12, Boccaccio addresses the common criticism that poetry is often unclear and thus not understandable. He does not deny this, but points out that there are also many such passages in Plato and Aristotle's philosophical writings, as well as in the Bible. Lack of clarity probably does not stem from the author's thirst to give the works the stamp of imaginative art, as "if He were not the sublime Artificer of the universe" (Leitch et al. 2010: 198). He explains unclear passages through a straightforward message: "Some things are naturally so profound that not without difficulty can the most exceptional keenness in intellect sound their depths" (Leitch et al. 2010: 198). The second reason for expressing things in an elevated and unclear style is to protect "matters truly solemn and memorable" from disrespectful individuals, so that they may not deal lightly with such things. In the middle of the chapter he states:

"Wherefore I again grant that poets are at times obscure, but invariably explicable if approached by a sane mind; for these cavillers view them with owl eyes, not human. Surely no one can believe that poets invidiously veil the truth with fiction, either to deprive the reader of the hidden sense, or to appear the more clever; but rather to make truths which would otherwise cheapen by exposure the object of strong intellectual effort and various interpretation, that in ultimate discovery they shall be more precious." (Leitch et al. 2010: 199)

Boccaccio supports this principle viewpoint through Augustine's arguments in his various works on the advantages of the lack of clarity of the Divine word, as well as through those of the Italian poet and humanist Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374): "In poetic narrative above all, the poets maintain majesty of style and corresponding dignity" (Leitch et al. 2010: 200). The chapter ends with a reference to Jesus' warning in Mt 7:6: "For we are forbidden by divine command to give that which is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before swine."

In the 19th century, literary theory experienced quite a shift in direction in terms of judgements on expressing reality and truth, aesthetic value, and the educational role of literature. In France and in England, some writers and critics began to turn away from the traditional moral viewpoint of art in general and literature in particular – a view which stemmed from the Greco-Roman tradition – in favour of the autonomy of the principle of the beautiful and of independence from moral concerns. Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) writes in the forward to his work *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) "Objects are beauti-

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ful in inverse proportion to their utility" ("*Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien*"), a statement in which lies the beginning of the principle of art that exists for itself (*l'art pour l'art*). Continuing on this new artistic path were Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907), Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Walter Pater (1839–1894), and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), while in philosophy Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) developed similarly new ideas.

Oscar Wilde was particularly influential for the development of modern literary theory. In his last dialogue work, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation" (1889), he opines that art is an expression only of itself. His thesis is that life is more an imitation of art than art an imitation of life. In *The Critic as Artist* (1890, 1891), he develops a dialogue about nature and about the relation between art and criticism. Here he emphasizes his respect for style and form; in contrast to the Romantics, Wilde denies the role of artistic inspiration. To his mind, literary criticism is a type of autobiography and impressionism that opposes history because history limits its freedom of individual expression. His view of art is formulated with particular clarity and concentration in the Preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

"The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.
The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.
The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography.
Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.
Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.
They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.
There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book.
Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.
The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.
The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.
The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium.
No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved.
No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.
No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.
Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art.
Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art.
From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type.
All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.
Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital.
When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.
We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.
All art is quite useless."

4

Leitch et al. reproduce three chapters of Book 14 of *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*: "Other Cavillers at the Poets and Their Imputations," "The Definition of Poetry, Its Origin, and Function," and "The Obscurity of Poetry Is Not Just Cause for Condemning It" (in Charles Osgood's translation).

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Conclusion

This survey of views of art in general and especially literature in its connection with the question of reality and truth has shown that this question has assumed a central position in every detailed discussion of art from antiquity to the present. Immersing oneself in the nature and purpose of literature shows that all writers try, in the most varied of ways, to depict reality when they choose their subject matter, themes, and motifs from their material, cultural, and spiritual environments and from history, and when they endeavour to show man in his intellectual and spiritual state and in his relations with others. Historical themes, which are at the centre of the literary types of the epic, biography, autobiography, the novel, and others, are at the same time bound to the question of reality and truth because living individuals are pressed into a sometimes narrow, sometimes broad, existential, social, and historical framework.

Literary symbols offer great support to the reader of literature. They strengthen the reader's awareness that she/he is not alone in the world but is linked to the stories of all people who are seeking their own image as well as clarifying their relation to the world, to man and to the very question of the meaning of life. Literary symbols are part of our personal life reality and our life surroundings; they are part of our real world and aid us greatly in interpersonal relations, indeed even in intercultural dialogue. Literary symbols help us in reflecting on and contemplating how it is that all people in the world are bound together in common desires, longing and goals. In our consciousness they affirm the sense of moral order in man's life, the means and manners of rewarding justice and punishing injustice. Everything that functions as a theory in the fields of science, philosophy, and theology, everything that addresses reason, is "made human" in literature, and addresses the human heart, which, especially when encountering life's dramas, passionately seeks the truth.

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Irena Avsenik Nabergoj

Predmoderni filozofski pogledi na stvarnost i istinu u književnosti

Sažetak

Stavovi autora prikazanih i razmatranih u ovome radu pokazuju da je filozofijski pristup neizbježno u suprotnoj poziciji u odnosu na književne načine predstavljanja stvarnosti i istine u književnosti. Specifična domena filozofske refleksije je razjašnjavanje pojmova pomoću deduktivnih metoda ili čisto racionalno gledište, dok je književnost temeljena na iskustvu životnih priča u konkretnim okolnostima. Namjera je našeg bavljenja svetim i sekularnim književnim tekstovima otkriti književne načine promatranja i izražavanja stvarnosti i istine u najosnovnijem životnom obliku. U svakome vremenu možemo uočiti potrebu za prenošenjem osjetilnog iskustva i poticanjem etičke refleksije koristeći prikladnije načine izričaja imajući u vidu šire strukture književnog predstavljanja stvarnosti i istine. Književnost se bavi predstavljanjem života u svim njegovim kontrastnim pojavljivanjima u uvjerljivim književnim formama, te je stoga intrinzično povezana s pitanjima estetike. U međuvremenu, etički senzibilitet najbolje funkcionira u susretu s pojedinim osobama u specifičnim kontekstima. Književna djela kombiniraju posebno i opće u konkretnim životnim situacijama i pojedinim karakterima.

Ključne riječi

književna kritika, književnost, filozofija, etika, estetika, stvarnost, istina

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Vormoderne philosophische Auffassungen zur Realität und Wahrheit in der Literatur

Zusammenfassung

Die in der vorliegenden Arbeit umrissenen und untersuchten Stellungnahmen der Autoren signalisieren, dass die philosophische Herangehensweise unentrinnbar eine Kontrastposition gegenüber den literarischen Strategien der Wirklichkeits- und Wahrheitsdarstellung innerhalb der Literatur einnimmt. Eine spezifische Domäne der philosophischen Reflexion bezieht sich auf die Begriffsverdeutlichung vermöge deduktiver Methoden bzw. die rein rationale Sehweise, während die Literatur auf Erfahrungen der Lebensgeschichten in konkreten Gegebenheiten fußt. Die Absicht unserer Auseinandersetzung mit geistlichen und säkularen literarischen Texten besteht darin, literarische Praktiken der Realitäts- bzw. Wahrheitsbeobachtung bzw. -expression in deren elementarsten Lebensform an den Tag zu ziehen. Zu allen Zeiten lässt sich das Bedürfnis nach Übermittlung der Sinneserfahrung als auch nach dem Wachrufen ethischer Reflexionen erspüren – unter Zuhilfenahme von einem geeigneteren Ausdrucksmodus und mit dem Blick auf die weitläufigeren Strukturen der literarischen Wirklichkeits- bzw. Wahrheitsdarstellung. Das literarische Schrifttum beschäftigt sich mit der Lebensabbildung in deren sämtlichen gegensätzlichen Manifestationen in überzeugenden literarischen Formen, und ist ebendeshalb intrinsisch mit den Fragen der Ästhetik verkettet. Indessen agiert die ethische Sensibilität bestens bei der Begegnung mit einzelnen Personen in charakteristischen Begleitumständen. Die Literaturwerke kombinieren das Besondere und das Allgemeine in greifbaren Lebenssituationen als auch in individuellen Charakteren.

Schlüsselwörter

Literaturkritik, Literatur, Philosophie, Ethik, Ästhetik, Wirklichkeit, Wahrheit

Irena Avsenik Nabergoj

Regards philosophiques pré-modernes sur la réalité et la vérité dans la littérature

Résumé

Les positions des auteurs esquissées et examinées dans cet article montrent qu'une approche philosophique est inévitablement dans une situation d'opposition par rapport aux modes littéraires d'expression de la réalité et de la vérité dans la littérature. Le domaine spécifique de la réflexion philosophique est la clarification des concepts à l'aide des méthodes de déduction ou un point de vue purement rationnel, tandis que la littérature se fonde sur l'expérience des histoires de vie dans des circonstances concrètes. La perspective de notre traitement des textes littéraires sacrés et laïques est de découvrir des façons littéraires d'observer et d'exprimer la réalité et la vérité dans la forme la plus élémentaire de vie. En tout temps, nous pouvons observer le besoin de transmettre l'expérience sensible et de susciter la réflexion éthique en utilisant un mode d'expression plus adéquat sans perdre de vue des structures plus larges de la représentation littéraire de la réalité et de la vérité. La littérature traite de la représentation de la vie dans toutes ses manifestations contrastées dans les formes littéraires probantes, étant ainsi intrinsèquement liée aux questions esthétiques. Cependant, la sensibilité éthique fonctionne au mieux dans la rencontre avec des personnes particulières dans des contextes spécifiques. Les œuvres littéraires combinent le particulier et le général dans les situations de vie concrètes et dans les caractères individuels.

Mots-clés

critique littéraire, littérature, philosophie, éthique, esthétique, réalité, vérité