

## *Undecidable Literary Interpretations and Aesthetic Literary Value*

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*Literature has been philosophically understood as a practice in the last thirty years, which involves “modes of utterance” and stances, not intrinsic textual properties. Thus, the place for semantics in philosophical inquiry has clearly diminished. Literary aesthetic appreciation has shifted its focus from aesthetic realism, based on the study of textual features, to ways of reading. Peter Lamarque’s concept of narrative opacity is a clear example of this shift. According to the philosophy of literature, literature, like any other art form, does not compel us to engage realistically with it. Against this trend, this paper argues for the distinction between two kinds of opacity, defending textual opacity as a necessary condition for literary opacity. In this sense, examples in literary criticism properly illustrate not a peripheral role of meaning in literary appreciation, but arbitrariness in interpretation, which involves semantic concerns. So the assumed interest in the specific ways in which literature embeds meaning in fictional narrative works.*

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### 1. *Preliminary remarks*

In an insightful paper, Peter Lamarque argued that “the interests of the literary critic diverge from those of the logician” (Lamarque 1990a: 341) because what “a logician has to say about fiction *per se* is often remote from what a literary critic has to say about particular works of fiction” (Lamarque 1990a: 333). His sound arguments grasp our intuitions concerning the differences between literary criticism and logic.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the current Lamarquean theses on narrative opacity and thought theory strengthen his earlier arguments even more (Lamarque 2015: 51).

The logician's tools cannot properly grasp literary aspects such as connotation, thematic content, and narrative perspective. Thus, current Lamarquean approaches to literature provide interesting solutions to satisfy these conceptual requirements outside the logician domain (Lamarque 2014, 2015, 2017a; Lamarque and Olsen 1994).

Philosophy, however, has argued that the same theoretical framework accounts for very diverse artworld practices, failing to explain specific artistic practices. More particularly, intuitively diverse artistic objects such as Marcel Duchamp's *The Great Glass* or Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and Kafka's modernist literature are covered by the same institutional principles, missing in the process some of their peculiarities.

Literature is frequently understood in terms of relational, not monadic predicates. So, the literary "per se" is more of a *stance* than a textual property:

[T]he fictive dimension of stories (or narratives) is explicable only in terms of a rule-governed practice, central to which are a certain mode of utterance (fictive utterance) and a certain complex of attitudes (the fictive stance) [...] The central focus is not on the structural or semantic properties of sentences but on the conditions under which they are uttered, the attitudes they invoke, and the role they play in social interactions. (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 32)<sup>2</sup>

Opacity is a response to what the propositional literary attitude is. So understood, from narrative opacity and what Peter Lamarque calls "thought theory" (Lamarque 1981), the rational justification of aesthetic judgments of literature rests on fictive stances, not textual properties. Our discussion is precisely on the aesthetic justification of literary appreciation. It's impossible to perceptively distinguish between artworks and real things, likewise, according to the philosophy of literature, no text intrinsically contains any literary feature. So, if what we call *literary cognitivism* does not exclude the semantic dimension of literature, literary appreciation, from a philosophical point of view, maybe has nothing to do with meaning, hence, nothing to do with cognitivism. However, by discussing the institutional nature of opacity, it will also be possible to discuss the aesthetic nature of literary appreciation.

First, I argue that "narrative opacity" is the wrong expression for what should be called "literary opacity." Second, literary opacity, as a literary stance, is also determined by narrative opacity, textually defined. Thus, unlike the aesthetic justification of visual objects, which can be set out in both realist and anti-realist terms, the aesthetic justification of literature requires a clear realist dimension based on textual (semantic) properties.<sup>3</sup> To take a step toward the first point it is fruitful

<sup>2</sup> We can find another interesting conception of *fictive stance* in (Wolterstorff 1981: 233).

<sup>3</sup> The general implicit philosophical framework of this paper is that of María José Alcaraz León (2008).

to compare a traditional semantic approach to literature, namely, Galvano Della Volpe's theory of poetic speech to Peter Lamarque's theory of opacity as a propositional attitude. To develop the second point, I distinguish between textual and narrative opacity, illustrating this distinction with brief remarks on Franz Kafka's literature.

## 2. *Polysemy and paraphrasing*

Galvano Della Volpe's main concern is to discuss an old widespread aesthetic thesis: the irrationality of art and the apparent exclusive rationality of science. He refers to "traditional aesthetic mysticism" for which literary comprehension is nothing more than "pure intuition" or 'pure image', [which] possesses a 'cosmic' or universal quality of a mystical and enigmatic kind" (Della Volpe 1978: 99). That mysticism, according to him, assumes a strong distinction between thought and language, which would make sense of a purely private aesthetic mental state. Thus, his efforts are addressed to question this distinction and identify both convergences and divergences between science and art. Through the dominant linguistic framework of his time, Della Volpe offered a clear answer to the first point: aesthetic mysticism forgets that the *parole* (speech) necessarily implies a *langue* (language), and conversely, the *parole* can produce changes in the *langue* (Della Volpe 1978: 101). Indeed, inside his framework, this logical step seems important because, assuming language as a "suprastructural" character, he precludes any possibility to argue for a completely private speech. Thus, if every speech act implies the whole social structure of language, every attempt to reduce its individual uses into private ones seems to be inhibited. At the same time, any modification of language originally detected in speech allows Della Volpe to argue for a dynamic relationship between general social conventions and their individual uses.<sup>4</sup> More interesting, however, is his conclusion on the divergences and convergences between science and literature. Pursuing a refutation of mysticism, Della Volpe shows a common feature of science and literature: the semantic control of language in the face of equivocal ordinary speech. Let us consider his answer to this point.

His conclusions rest on a few interesting examples. From these examples, Della Volpe attributes what he calls "semantic autonomy" (Della Volpe 1978: 116) to literature, while science implies "interchangeability and heteronomy" (Della Volpe 1978: 117). The first and second examples are from Petrarch and Góngora. The strategy employed in the first is, I think, the most interesting of the two. It compares the first and second versions of a poem to infer the relevance of connotation to poetry. This is the example from Petrarch's *canzone*:

<sup>4</sup> Della Volpe's theoretical assumptions remain in Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *speech* and *language* (Vulpe 2000: 292).

*In un boschetto novo, a l'un de' canti,  
 Vidi un giovane lauro verde e schietto,  
 E fra i bei rami udiassi dolci canti  
 (In a new wood, at one corner,  
 I saw a young laurel green and pure,  
 And amid its faire branches were heard sweet songs)*  
 (Quoted in Della Volpe 1978: 111)

The second version, however, is as follows:

*In un boschetto novo i rami santi  
 Florian d'un lauro giovenetto e schietto,  
 Ch'un delli arbor pareva di paradiso;  
 E di sua ombra uscian sí dolci canti  
 (In a new wood were blossoming  
 The holy branches of a laurel young and pure,  
 Which seemed one of the trees of paradise;  
 And from its shade there issued such sweet songs)*  
 (Quoted in Della Volpe 1978: 112)

As we see, Petrarch decided to change his first attempt. The first element, which vaguely establishes a location, remains unchanged. However, in that same verse, “at once corner” is replaced with “were blossoming” as a predicate of “The holy branches of a laurel young and pure.” Thus, the original introduction of a first person’s point of view is erased in favor of a more objective perspective whose focus is on an event involving, not the laurel as a whole, but its *holy branches*. Furthermore, the second verse gets rid of “green,” only remaining the adjectives “young” and “pure.” That perhaps is related to a redundant image, juxtaposing *laurels* and *green*. As a complete novelty, Petrarch also introduces one more verse in the strophe: “Which seemed one the trees of paradise.” This is the relative clause chosen by Petrarch to give a completely different *connotation* to the strophe. Also, the closing passages in each version are completely different: while, in the first attempt, the mention of the laurel’s branches in the final verse appears associated with music perception, in the final version, there is no focus on perception but sweet music itself emerging from the laurel’s shade. Thus, the general subjective tone was erased in the last version in favor of a more objective one. The last version also introduces a comparative image, which adds another sense completely absent from the first version. Moreover, the laurel is only a reference point in the final version because the focus is on its branches. With all these changes, tone, perspective, and focal elements have entirely changed from one version to another. Thus, from a denotative point of view, maybe these changes are not as relevant as the connotative ones. In fact, because of some identical references in these versions, it is possible to infer the general identity of both strophes. However, those subtle modifications (substitutions, perspective changes, new elements, etc.) transform the poem’s identity *as a poem*. By pointing out the role of connotation to

convey poetic meaning, Della Volpe distinguishes poetic discourse from any other.

The second example from Góngora is the following:

*cada sol repetido es un cometa*  
(every sun repeated is a comet)

(Quoted in Della Volpe 1978: 141)

The very idea of a comet in that passage could be completely blurred if it were substituted for “flash lightning” because “the poetic effect immediately dissolves” (Della Volpe 1978: 142). The metaphor in the verse involves familiar domains. Although the image of a flash of lightning stimulates images of speed and light as well, it also brings to mind other concepts such as discharge, speed and violence, and, of course, lightning as an atmospheric phenomenon, not an astronomic one. These domain concepts focus on other connotations, so the initial ones are put aside. Again, paraphrasing is a key procedure to test the subtle nature of poetic communication or, in other words, to argue for the high relevance of connotation to the detriment of denotation in poetry. Thus, according to Della Volpe, every poetic transformation entails decisions on specific connotations. Because of the important role of *polysemy* in poetic communication, poetry, like science, subtly tries to control the meanings conveyed through language.<sup>5</sup> Science, however, does not apply its control in the form of coordinated connotations but univocal use of terms. Poetry is highly sensitive to linguistic changes, while scientific texts can diversely reorder sentences without deep alterations. Therefore, while poetry conveys its meaning polysemically, science does it univocally. For Della Volpe, this implies that poetic texts have semantic autonomy. Although all of poetry’s linguistic elements belong to the entire social institution called *language*, it reshapes its meaning through peculiar and subtle *paraphrases*. On the contrary, science’s language is, as he called it, “omni-contextual” because of “its semantic heteronomy or dependence on innumerable other contexts” (Della Volpe 1978: 115). To sum up, while poetry is highly sensitive to linguistic modifications, the limit of scientific paraphrases is only truth preservation.<sup>6</sup>

To end this section, I want to make a brief commentary on the critic’s task according to Della Volpe. For him, poetic paraphrasing reshapes ordinary equivocal meanings to explore specific connotations, being the theoretical procedure to test the subtle semantic nature of poetry. Thus, paraphrasing is the literary critic’s main theoretical tool. It allows the critic to identify the specific semantic handling of ordinary

<sup>5</sup> Because of lexical reasons associated with his canon of precision, Della Volpe decided to substitute *connotation* for *polysemic*. Thus, both terms are synonymous (Della Volpe 1978: 123).

<sup>6</sup> This point is entirely coincident with Quine’s concerns with preserving truth. To read an example and some brief characterization of Quinean opacity, see McGregor (2015a: 347).

equivocal speech extracting connotations from diverse everyday mixtures of meanings, images, references, etc. According to him, criticism wonders “whether the text, as a whole or as an element, is something organic-contextual rather than something omni-contextual or even omni-textual” (Della Volpe 1978: 127). In that way, criticism explores how a poetic text gains its semantic autonomy or, in other words, through paraphrasing, criticism studies which semantic elements are reshaping ordinary speech.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. *Opacity and salva fictione*

The reader who connects Galvano Della Volpe’s semantic theory and the contemporary philosophical frame is not entirely wrong. Keep in mind, for example, concepts such as *narrative opacity* (Lamarque 2014, 2015, 2017a) and *literary thickness* (McGregor 2015a, 2015b, 2016). According to Rafe MacGregor, literary works, both poetic and narrative, are highly sensitive to formal changes because content and form are *inseparable* (McGregor 2015a: 346). For its part, “the content of literary fictional narratives stands in a peculiarly intimate relation to the manner in which it is presented” (Lamarque 2014: 3). So, both philosophers argue for the peculiar relationship between contents and their modes of presentation, i.e., their forms. Contents and forms are inseparable in *literary works*. Focusing my efforts this time on the Lamarquean opacity thesis, I want to show some convergences and divergences between his concept and Della Volpe’s approach.<sup>8</sup> Let us consider the concept of *narrative opacity*. This counterpoint is useful to clarify two concepts of opacity, namely, as an intrinsic feature—Dellavolpean conception—and as a relational property—Lamarquean point of view.

As appeared at the beginning of *The opacity of narrative*, opacity seems to be an intrinsic property of texts. In fact, those who read the above quote on narrative opacity without any background thesis may think that opacity is not only a property of a literary work but of the text itself. A text would then be opaque if any change in its manner of presentation is also a change in its content. In that sense, textual opacity would depend on applying the principle of *salva fictione*. According to Lamarque and Haugom Olsen, while *salva veritate* is the preserving truth principle, *salva fictione* aims to characterize literary fiction. That, of course, presupposes a distinction between preserving the truth and literature’s intentions. A poetic text, namely, an opaque text, will be any text that subtly conveys its content by specific connotations. Two co-referential singular terms can substitute each other without affecting truth, but both do not necessarily convey equal connotations. Thus, it is possible to say that there is no notable difference between

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Dellavolpean concept of paraphrasis see Marconi (2019).

<sup>8</sup> For my current focus, I leave the dialogue on McGregor’s sound and interesting theses on narrative thickness for another occasion.

*opacity* and *polysemy*. Polysemic texts are those whose contents remain inseparable from their forms of presentation. Remembering that example from Gongora, “cada sol repetido es un cuerpo celeste sólido que deambula por el sistema solar” does not convey the same content as in the original version. For truth’s sake, we can replace the original word “cometa” with one of their possible definitions. This, however, would not preserve the original literary content. The same can be said about opacity. The main point here is not, as Lamarque indicates (Lamarque 2014: 12, Lamarque 2015: 50), to defend the *unparaphrasable* character of literary works; on the contrary, paraphrasing is more than possible for any literary piece. In fact, Della Volpe would agree completely. The problem here is replacing an original literary redaction with a resulting paraphrase without losing the literary content.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, months after its publication, *The opacity of narrative* received objections regarding precisely this point. Eva Maria Konrad, for example, pointed out the non-intrinsic character of opacity, saying that “opacity appears to be a ‘feature of a “literary” reading of a work’ (p. 68), but not of the work itself” (Konrad 2015: 1326). I agree with her on the relevance of that issue because “Lamarque repeatedly speaks of the ‘opacity of narratives’ (and not of the ‘opacity of reading narratives’) just as if opacity *were* a feature of certain texts” (ibid.). Sometimes, the book contains sentences where *opacity* is used as if opacity were an intrinsic property of literary texts. Indeed, the accurate Lamarquean expression should be “literary opacity,” not merely “narrative opacity” because opacity’s most important dimension lies not in its intrinsic semantic features but in the “propositional attitudes (such as thinking, imagining, believing) taken towards narrative content” (Lamarque 2015: 43).

From this issue follows an immediate result. Della Volpe talked about texts with intrinsic properties, so, according to him, any literary property can be reduced to semantic features. Lamarque, however, disagrees. This is, I think, peculiar because many reviewers have usually taken the bait. Indeed, they know that the theses defended in the chapter six of *The Opacity of Narrative* are based on a Wittgensteinian framework, where literature is conceived in terms of diverse institutional practices (Lamarque 2014). However, this thesis is not explicitly related to other theses defended by Lamarque in other contexts. For example, Laszlo Kajtar has written an illuminating review of *The opacity of narrative*, including some brief comments on chapter six on practices. His final remarks, however, are these:

Despite the difficulties that the idea of opacity brings with it, it labels a persuasive account of what makes literary narratives special. On this view, lit-

<sup>9</sup> The question about form and content, or even form and meaning, in literature has been mostly set out through the paraphrase debate. We can consider it then as a way of thinking about the rational justification of literary value because its central point consists on the role of meaning, namely, textual features in literary appreciation (Currie and Frascaroli 2021; Kivy 2011; Lamarque 2009, 2014, 2017).

erary narratives have distinct, inherent values independently of any actual reader's reaction to them. In order to benefit from the valuable literariness of these narratives, the reader has to attune him- or herself and assume the proper literary attitude that these texts demand (Kajtar 2015: 401)

The author is plenty aware of opacity as a non-intrinsic feature, but at the same time, he uses the term *text*; in that, a text demands such and such an attitude from the reader. However, if other Lamarquean theses are introduced, the lexical preferences mostly change. Using *text* to describe any literary work can be confusing because Lamarque explicitly distinguishes between *text* and *work*. Texts do not demand attitudes or *stances* (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 32, Lamarque 2019: 476) but the works do. Following some formulae from McGregor, opacity is interest-relative because:

The literary stance and the author's intention to invoke this stance are reliant upon the practice of literature, the set of concepts and conventions that constitute the institutional framework within which literary works are presented and received (McGregor 2015a: 344–345).

One text can never convey any *institutional a priori* stance because an institutional framework holds a particular literary stance *related to* reading. So, a literary work can demand literary attitudes, a text cannot. Three years after the publication of *The opacity of narrative*, Lamarque explicitly says from the very beginning that opacity *especially* refers to ways of reading dependent on institutional contexts: "To read for opacity is partly what it is to read 'from a literary point of view' or to read literature 'as literature'" (Lamarque 2017a: 105). If considered from a purely semantic Dellavolpean point of view, one text can be transparent or, in other words, univocal and even so opaque from the reader's point of view. A literary reading implies opacity, but such opacity could be excluded from the list of the text's intrinsic properties. This needs some comments.

We should explore these issues using the Lamarquean notion of interpretation (Lamarque 2000, 2002), his essentialist aesthetic theory (Lamarque 2010), his account of narrative practices (Lamarque 1990b, 2004, 2007b), and his discussion on the aestheticity of literature (Lamarque 2007a). For the sake of brevity, I introduce a sketch of his most relevant theses, which will be sufficient for my purposes.

A Text's identity criteria is, according to Lamarque, entirely different from those for literary works. A text "is an ordered set of sentence-types individuated at least partly by semantic and syntactic properties" (Lamarque 2000: 105); thus, two "texts are identical if they have the same semantic and syntactic properties, are in the same language, and consist of the same word-types and sentence-type ordered in the same way" (ibid.). That is no surprise at all. However, a literary work is not identical to a text in that framework. Why? Because literary works "are cultural objects, dependent on a practice governed by social conventions concerning the production and reception of texts" (ibid.). The



example usually offered to illustrate that thesis is from the playful J. L. Borges' *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote*. I think, however, that it is not a good example because there is no comparison between a text and a literary work but two already consecrated literary pieces. That is not a minor point because a pure comparison between works and texts needs, in fact, two dimensions: first, seeing a text through purely linguistic glasses (syntaxis, morphology, semantics, etc.), and second, choosing a no-literary set of sentences. As I said, Lamarque's thesis is clear: no intrinsic textual property defines literariness. Therefore, a way of reading—or interpreting—is determined by conventions, not by intrinsic properties.

To some extent, when an institutional context turns a text into a literary work, it also stipulates, as it were, instructions for use. Since a text is subsumed under institutional conventions, for example, the literary fictional narrative conventions, the institution expects a particular fictive stance from the reader. At this point, it is clearer why Kajtar's interpretation needs an adjustment. No text demands an attitude from the reader because no text is intrinsically a literary work. Only an institutional context would confer such character. According to Lamarque, there are then three interpretative dimensions: first, the text as such; second, the text as a work; third, and finally, the work as an object-of-interpretation (Lamarque 2000: 109–111). Sometimes, he says, "so close is the linking of work and mode of interpretation that there is an inevitable blurring of what is 'in' a work [...] and what is 'imputed to' it through interpretation" (Lamarque 2000: 119). This third dimension can be, as it were, naturalized in such a way that it can be regarded as an intrinsic work property and comprehended as an intrinsic textual property. The same can be said, for its part, of the narrative.

Of course, a literary narrative fiction is, before anything else, a narrative, namely a narrative text, so, as a simple hypothesis, the literary fictional character may be a narrative property. Lamarque's response, however, is negative. The conditions for a narrative are, he says, *minimal*. First, a narrative implies telling a story (Lamarque 2004: 394). Thus, the story "must be told," *not found* (ibid.). Furthermore, the story must convey "at least two events" connected not logically but loosely (ibid.) I return to this point shortly. Finally, every narrative implies "a temporal relation between the events, even if just that of simultaneity" (ibid.). According to Lamarque, if these are the necessary conditions for a narrative, there is only very general information to infer "from the premise that a piece of discourse is a narrative" (ibid.). From that minimal information, it would be conceptually impossible to classify the diverse types of narrative. To describe these minimal properties, it would then not be sufficient to, for example, draw any conclusion about literary narratives. Therefore, the literary character of a narrative could not be explained through any intrinsic narrative property *per se*.

Neither intrinsic textual nor specifically intrinsic narrative properties account for literary narrative fiction. From both analyses, the conclusion is the same: “the most fruitful way of drawing the distinctions that matter is in terms of narrative practices” (Lamarque 2004: 400). In other words, aesthetic or literary properties are not reducible to physical or textual properties. Arthur Danto’s theses are presupposed in the argument as it would be possible for two identical texts to have different literary properties.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the main Lamarquean conclusion is that “works of art are identifiable not only by [...] textual properties for the literary arts- but by complex relational properties which embed the works in an [...] institutional [...] context” (Lamarque 2010: 105). Any hypothesis on the supervenience of literary properties from textual, narrative ones is thus discarded. Literariness does not *supervene* from any set of textual properties.

As Lamarque defines it, I conclude that opacity is not an intrinsic textual property but an intrinsic property of *literary works*. Every literary work brings its own instructions for reading, and opacity is precisely the stance determined by the practice of literary narrative fiction. Thus, its special intrinsic character has all to do with conventions rather than narrative properties themselves. Della Volpe then no longer agrees with Lamarque. Since *polysemy* is inherent to literary texts, literary texts are necessarily polysemic for him. However, he did not recognize the institutional dimension involved in the very idea of a literary work, so he tried to reduce literature only to semantic aspects. Texts, not works are, for him, the key to interpretation.

Thus, both conceptions of literature engage with two diverse conceptions of the aesthetic justification of literary value. On the one hand, Della Volpe argues for a justification based on textual properties using paraphrasing procedures on texts as an argument for literary value. On the other, Lamarque emphasizes the role of perspectivism triggered by thought-clusters (Lamarque 2014: 142). In other words, while Della Volpe was interested in the particular semantic changes once narrative treatments handle ordinary concepts, Lamarque is interested in the *ways of reading* multiple narrative layers.<sup>11</sup> As I understand their theses, meaning and appreciation seem almost mutually exclusive.

<sup>10</sup> Again, an important point here has to do with the philosophical interpretation of Borges’ *Pierre Menard: autor del Quijote*. For Danto, the Borgean story is a hidden premise to extend his conclusions on Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* to literature (Danto 1984: 14). Some other interpretations, however, disagree with him because they do not recognize philosophical questions but literary ones. For B. R. Tilghman, for example, “Pierre Menard” says “something [...] about how we read and describe works of literature” (Tilghman 1982: 297), however “Danto has converted this piece of criticism into a piece of philosophy” (ibid.). Peter Lamarque, for his part, seems to partially accept Danto’s point of view (Lamarque 2000: 105).

<sup>11</sup> Questioning Peter Kivy’s point of view, Lamarque says “Bradley’s central concerns are less about paraphrase, more about value, less about what poems mean, more about how to read poetry” (Lamarque 2009: 403). That quote applies to the Lamarquean thesis too.

However, what if opacity, textually considered, implies a cognoscitive level where we can find semantic peculiarities as much as aesthetic appreciation? Let us consider the Lamarquean opacity as an aesthetic stance.

#### 4. *Fill in the Blanks*

The problem I see emerges from that curious Lamarquean clause that I quote again: “at least two events must be depicted in a narrative and there must be some more or less loose, albeit non-logical, relation between the events” (Lamarque 2004: 394). These two adjectives—loose and non-logical—are notably informative, at least from a Dellavolpean point of view, because they point out basic semantic features of narrative. Carefully read, this passage seems to say that trying to read a narrative text logically organized as narrative literature would be a bit frustrating. If this point is conceded, it is necessary to distinguish between a textual opacity (T-opacity) and a literary opacity (L-opacity).<sup>12</sup> There are opaque and transparent texts, for example, transparent essays whose contents remain consistently organized, following the virtues of philosophical or scientific texts (Rescher 2007). While opaque essays will be those whose content remain confusing, inconsistent, incomplete, not entirely assertive, and so on. Lamarque has focused on opacity as a stance, but, as I argue, a minimal T-opacity stipulates some way of reading that L-opacity alone cannot determine. Literary opacity is then impossible when a transparent text is read, although the same philosophical framework is brought into play, whether it is literature or visual art, the studied object, narrative literature, implies necessarily non-relational properties, unlike objects such as Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is necessary to rethink the concept of narrative transparency because a logically organized narrative determines its interpretation beyond any institutional context. In brief, Lamarque seems to say that if one reads a transparent fictional text, that is, a systematic organization of fictional events, then there would be no place for literary narrative. So, I argue that there would be no possibility to L-opaquely read a T-transparent text because a T-transparent text obstructs the minimal conditions for narrative literary reading. Therefore, the Lamarquean condition of the narrative is not so minimal.

Indeed, it is unclear how to read some texts literally. Many contemporary literary pieces ask for another type of stance or even reject any standard propositional attitude. If that is true, it is false that every literary narrative fiction gives an interpretation key, which is,

<sup>12</sup> I prefer “literary opacity” to “narrative opacity” precisely because “narrative” is not identical, in Lamarquean terms, to “literary narrative fiction,” which, for its part, establishes opacity as a suitable way of reading, not an intrinsic textual property.

<sup>13</sup> To clearly understand this distinction between monadic and relational predicates see Danto (1971: 12).

in fact, ever polemic in criticism history. We can find an example in interpreters of Franz Kafka's prose who have tried to read his works to infer T-transparent messages reducible to philosophical or doctrinal programs.<sup>14</sup> Let me clarify this point.

Marthe Robert, a great Kafka interpreter, has pointed out the enormous literary damage caused by attempting to reduce Kafka's literary writings to doctrinal principles (Robert 1969: 33 f.). According to her, Kafka's prose intrinsically rejects any attempt at L-transparent reading because it seems to be *T-opaque*, not merely because our way of reading is opaque (L-opaque). So, Kafka's literary opacity is not only the result of an active propositional attitude triggered by the reader but an intrinsic semantic property. Theological interpretations of *The trial* have failed, for example, because explicit and implicit fictional facts provide several counterexamples to them (Robert 1969: 36). If Josef K is a "new Job heroically arguing with God" Robert says, the fictional court could be divine, but, actually, it is not because it is located at "an awful, popular building, riddle with children; the lawyer does not defend Josef K [...] K. finds only one man, who like him has been accused [...], which implies that everybody is at peace with justice" (Robert 1969: 37).<sup>15</sup> So, trying a *T-transparent reading* of *The trial* entails reducing its narrative fictional character to a transparent textual discourse according to standards of theoretical writing. A transparent textual reading should then be consistent, ambiguous, or polysemic. Clearly, we expect this from philosophical writings that follow a certain canon of scientific-like rigorous production (Rescher 2007: 2), but not from literature. To put that even clearer, when the theoretical procedure to read literature consists of attributing some hidden doctrinal sense or meaning, what I call *T-transparent reading*, the whole fictional narrative information must satisfy every consequence from that sense or meaning. In brief, "reducing" refers to producing an interpretative model to recognize cohesive connections between facts in fiction, all of them consistent with a theoretical sentence. Therefore, a "transparent" textual reading is defined as an interpretative model working as a function that consistently attributes a doctrinal sense, usually under the form of theoretical sentences, to every fictional fact.

The above case, for example, shows a theological hypothesis, which plays the role of the transparent textual message, and the procedure it requires to confirm its content. If *The trial* uncovers a theological sense, every conceptual matrix implied by the theological theory in question should be satisfied by every fictional fact. However, it is not my general point that these criticism procedures are essentially misguided. Instead, Robert specifically argues that Kafka's literature obstructs these

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, for example, was interested in discussing what he called "illustrated ontology," indicating all those interpretations that have tried to translate whole global narrative fictions into doctrinal existentialist or theological theses (Adorno 1986).

<sup>15</sup> My translation.

procedures, and *The trial* as a fictional text, not as a work, blocks them. Whatever the case may be, she and her counterparts have a cognoscitive interest in literature, which involves the fictional narrative texts as the justification exchanged in literary polemics. The narrative itself is then blocking any attempt to be reduced to only one interpretation. A L-opaque reading of *The trial* seems to be determined by its T-opaque narrative itself. Even if we try to T-transparent read some works, they block the attempts. That, of course, does not define them as literary, but an opaque literary work would not be possible if a text were not intrinsically opaque.

So far, it could be thought that I deny any role to institutional conventions, and I fall into what Gregory Currie calls “textualism” (Currie 1991). However, I simply argue that institutional literary rules do not determine every right stance entirely. Rather, literature merely requests to set aside any tendency to resolve the textual opacity. While a reader tries to read a T-opaque text, sometimes he or she tries also to identify the textual sources of opacity and conjecture possible fictional scenarios to reduce the entire set of narrative sentences to a coherent global interpretation. That is the kind of criticism against which Robert tried to defend Kafka, consisting of bringing the game of science into play (Albrecht and Edward 1993). On the contrary, a reader plays the institutional game of literature when one inhibits the tendency to consider polysemy as a theoretical problem. Instead, the reader intentionally engages with opacity as an intrinsic textual property under the form of textual lacunae, omissions, gaps, or inconsistencies. L-opacity, thus, is nothing more than embracing a T-opaque text without seeking complete coherence and cohesion.<sup>16</sup> An example can be helpful to comprehend this point better.

At the beginning of *The trial*, we can read this: “Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested” (Kafka 2009: 5). As I see it, this passage resembles crime fiction because it sets out a riddle, in this case, in the form of two acknowledged facts, a presupposition, a problem, and finally a hypothesis. The two explicit fictional facts are that Josef K. was arrested and that he has done anything wrong. However, keeping in mind the first fact, we can reinterpret the second one tacitly pointing out one presupposition: *someone is arrested if they have done something wrong*. Now, the reader knows that he or she encounters the work’s premature climax introduction because it raises two main questions: How was it possible for an arrest to have taken place without something wrong having been done? What is the meaning of “wrong,” according to this piece of fiction? That opening passage offers a hypothesis: “Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K.” So, at

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Iser see this when he says that “The indeterminate sections or gaps of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary, they are a basic element for the aesthetic response” (Iser 1997: 197)

least three more questions arise: who has been telling tales about Josef K? What exactly could someone have said about him? Why has Justice accepted those hypothetical lies? A riddle appears, asking for solutions from more fictional information, which the reader tries to find, becoming a detective. The novel, however, blocks any attempt to collect consistent fictional facts to satisfy a unique set of responses to those riddles. In this sense, the novel is “undecidable” because no unique interpretation can be satisfied by the entire set of fictional facts.<sup>17</sup> For example, Josef K is arrested, but peculiarly the guards say nothing about the charges or any institutional detail about the trial. The novel does not give the reader all the information needed to understand the development of the fictional facts. Instead, the novel increasingly adds more questions. As an illustration, the same can be said, for example, about the idea of arrest the novel introduces:

‘I presume you’ll want to go to the bank now?’ ‘To the bank?’ K. asked [...] That was why he repeated, ‘How can I go to the bank when I’ve been arrested?’ ‘Oh’, said the supervisor, who was already at the door, ‘you have misunderstood me. Yes, you have been arrested, but that should not prevent you from going to work. Nor should anything prevent you from going about your daily life as usual.’ ‘Then being arrested is not too bad’, said K., going up close to the supervisor. ‘I never meant it in any other way’, the latter said. (Kafka 2009: 14).

An arrest is the novel’s focus, but curious fictional information does not entirely satisfy all the reader’s expectations triggered by the concept of “arrest” because the above example sets out an inconsistency between a standard concept and what is possible to Josef K despite being arrested. If opacity and transparency were just propositional attitudes, then inconsistency would be merely the reader’s inhibition of *ad hoc* hypotheses that occasionally could turn the inconsistent members compatible. The propositional attitude is based on the fictional information provided by the narrative text itself. Even if the reader were interested in solving the contradiction between the arrest at large and the arrest-according-to-fiction, putting into play hermeneutic principles of scientific reading, the fictional narration itself would not provide any other information to dissolve the inconsistency. Therefore, T-opacity is a necessary condition for L-opacity. In such sketch, the role of narrative as a type of text is different from that of the Lamarquean approach. According to Lamarque’s theses, since L-opacity is neither identical to, nor supervenient from, textual properties, L-opacity is independent of T-opacity. This independence, however, is not consistent with the practices of literary criticism. Usually if there is no textual evidence being discussed, literary interpretations turn arbitrary. That is, in fact, Robert’s point. Literary narrative fictions compel us to map the liter-

<sup>17</sup> I borrow the expression “undecidable” from Michael Riffaterre and Tzvetan Todorov (Riffaterre 1981). the term also points out a distant analogy from mathematical logic that implies “the decision problem” (Grädel, Otto, Rosen 1999).

ary opacity from the textual properties. In this sense, narrative texts control the possible arbitrariness of criticism.

As I said, opacity is, in the Lamarquean sense, a propositional attitude or stance. Like any other artistic stance, literary opacity does not supervene, for Lamarque, from any textual feature. My point, however, is that there would be no literary opacity without an opaque textual narrative, which counts as an intrinsic textual property. In this sense, the literary stance for narrative literary fiction is determined by the interaction between some acquired institutional conventions and the particular textual narrative. Therefore, some texts require from us readers a transparent reading, others an *undecidable* opacity, and even others both stances. However, a strong sense of literary opacity is not possible without texts whose contents challenge our ordinary conceptual expectations, as in *The trial*.

Sometimes, criticism plays the game of attributing such and such meanings to analyzed works, sometimes not. Even so, what seems to guide the reader's behavior is not an *a priori* propositional attitude but the interaction between reader and text. In this sense, arguing the essential character of any stance contradicts the practices of literary criticism. Thus, the philosophy of literature seems to contradict literary criticism because philosophy explicitly argues that "interpretation in the context of poetry is not centrally involved with meaning, so much as with recovering broader kinds of achievement" (Lamarque 2009: 417), or that "[i]t is instructive to think of a certain species of poetic interpretation less as a search for meaning more as a way of encouraging a sharing from one reader to another of the experience a lyric can offer" (Lamarque 2017b: 70), or even that "a central component of literary interpretation properly so called [...] has less to do with meaning as such [...] than with appreciation of a special kind" (Lamarque 2002: 290). So, poetry, as well as narrative fiction, is understood under the same thesis, namely, the literary interpretation is a particular form of aesthetic appreciation, which involves, for its part, no place for a search for meanings. Hence, opacity is the special aesthetic quality of narrative literature, which implies, not an interest in a cognoscitive use of narrative texts, *but* an aesthetic one, orienting attention "to the capacity to present particularities *perspectivally* and literally in thought-provoking ways" (Lamarque 2014: 167). Just like Marthe Robert questions the idea of a unique interpretation of Kafka's literature, the artworld also discusses the old question of interpretative arbitrariness. Appreciation and meaning (and, for its part, literature cognitive powers) are not mutually exclusive aspects of literature. In fact, considering narrative features, involving meaning, seems to be an essential part of aesthetically appreciating literature.

Arbitrariness in criticism is not a trivial problem. Indeed, it is a counter-intuitive outcome from criticism's attempt to explain notably heterogeneous practices such as narrative literary fiction and conceptual artworks through the same theoretical framework. This is not

due to any theoretical mistake; rather, it has all to do with the role of texts and objects involved in the institutional practice of art. Talking about arbitrary interpreters of Marcel Duchamp's *The Great Glass*, Calvin Tomkins refers to "an international tribe whose numbers increase each year" (Tomkins 2014: 1), whose aim is still "to unlock the mystery" of "delay," a word used by Duchamp himself to describe his work. This tribe, says Tomkins, has tried to *link* Duchamp's work to Henry Bergson's philosophy, alchemy, or even incest. As an extreme example, Tomkins adds: "One Duchampian has suggested that it be read as an anagram for 'lad[e]y', so that 'delay in glass' becomes glass lady" (Tomkins 2014: 1–2). Only *The Green Box* paratextually could intervene in those criticism's random elucubrations. The risk then involved in contemporary conceptual art is precisely the arbitrariness of interpretation. In cases where the physical objects themselves cannot immediately control the absolute non-sense, the epistemic intervention of paratexts is necessary, such as in *The Green Box* for *The Great Glass*. Other examples can be more illustrative, especially those from the *performance* world or the *bioartworld*. Instances from these practices usually entail no connection at all between physical support and the playful game of interpretation. Literature, on the contrary, frequently needs its analogous support to those absent physical objects, e.g., literary texts. Even the most radical modernist novels exert an epistemic control on the opening range of possible interpretations.

## 5. Conclusion

Perceptual information is not useful for justifying our aesthetic interpretations in the artworld of abstract artifacts. As Arthur Danto noted in the sixties, being a bit informed about the history of American conceptual art is necessary to appreciate Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* aesthetically. So, in the game of knowing customary artistic theories and their history lies the thin red line between being distracted in the face of artworks that seem real things or being aware of their aesthetic status. However, literature—even the most modernist literature—opens its aesthetic doors without very demanding theoretical conditions, providing us with narrative interpretative keys. Thus, the institution of literature can agree or not with a clueless person about literary issues, but it rarely makes possible a *Testadura*. Through narrative and fictional features, literature engages the whole universe of the reader's concepts so that appreciating literature aesthetically also involves questions on meaning. Therefore, the aesthetic dimension of literature seems to require its specific theoretical model.



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