

## Assertions in Literary Fiction

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### Abstract

In this paper, I shall examine two types of assertions in literary narrative fiction: *direct assertions* and those I call *literary assertions*.<sup>1</sup> Direct assertions put forward propositions on a literal level and function as the author's assertions even if detached from their original context and applied in so-called ordinary discourse. Literary assertions, in turn, intertwine with the fictional discourse: they may be, for instance, uttered by a fictional character or refer to fictitious objects and yet convey the author's genuine assertions. The structure of the paper is twofold. The first, descriptive part is a question-answer type of discussion in which I shall introduce general philosophical arguments against assertions in fiction and present counter-arguments to them, paving the road to my account of literary assertions. In the second, argumentative part, in turn, I shall examine the nature of literary assertions, such as their semantic and 'aspectival' characteristics and their peculiar illocutionary force as well as the reader's stance toward them.

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### 1. Introduction

The cognitive value of assertions in literary fiction, their function as the author's truth-claims, and approaches looking for them have been objected to by various epistemological, ontological, logical and, naturally, aesthetic arguments. The epistemological, ontological and logical arguments advanced against assertions in fiction emphasize the nature of fictive utterances and the author's literary-fictive mode of speaking which is seen to detach her from the work. In turn, the aesthetic arguments stress the nature and aims of fictional literature. Although many of these arguments, and the theses I have split the complex arguments into, often overlap in the discussion, I will try to examine them separately in what follows.

First, it has been argued that art is not a cognitive pursuit and approaching artworks, such as literary fictions, as knowledge-yielding devices is a kind of category mistake; further, were there truths or true beliefs contained in literary works, these truths or true beliefs are not claimed or warranted by the work. Call this *the artistic thesis*. Second, it has been claimed that assertions in fiction are fictive utterances intended to be imagined or made-believe, that they are assertions of a fictional speaker and that instead of reality, they depict the fictional world of the work, for example, the narrator's attitudes; hence, attributing the assertions to the actual author of the work and considering them claimed of reality is logically invalid. Call this *the fictive mode of speaking argument*. Third, it has been suggested that if assertions are part

of the story, they have to be fictional, and if they are put forward by the author, they cannot be part of the story. Call this *the unity argument*. Fourth, it has been argued that even if there were authors' assertions in literary fiction, identifying and extracting them from the work would be epistemologically impossible (at least without knowing the *modus operandi*), for one cannot say whether the author, a literary artist, asserts the propositions she expresses; rather, believes a literary fiction expresses should be attributed to an "implied" author. Call this *the literary mode of speaking argument*. Fifth, it has been thought that in order to perform genuine communicative acts, the author should signal her act of asserting, so that the readers would recognize her assertions and assess them as such. Call this *the communication thesis*. Sixth, it has been claimed that the truths literary fictions convey are inarticulate and inagreeable among critics; that literary fictions neither make use of proper terms nor argue for their truths, and that there is nothing distinct in 'literary knowledge.' Call this *the triviality argument*. Seventh, it has been argued that rather than genuine assertions, assertions in literary fiction should be considered thematic statements which characterize and structure the theme of the work. Call this *the thematic thesis*. Finally, it has been suggested that because literary critics do not debate the truths conveyed by literary works, it is no part of literary interpretation to assess assertions in literature as true or false. Call this *the literary practice thesis*.

### **1.1. The Artistic Thesis**

The artistic thesis is an "aesthetic" argument which emphasizes the nature and aims of literary fiction as a form of art. The thesis maintains that the aim of artworks is not to convey truths but to provide aesthetic experience; it suggests that literary interpretation aims at aesthetic appreciation, not critical assessment of truth-claims.<sup>2</sup> Further, the thesis proposes that were there truths – or correspondence between the actual world and declarative sentences, that is, "world-adequate" descriptions – contained in a work of fiction, the work does not claim for the truths it contains. For instance, a formulation of the artistic thesis which may be called the 'no-warrant objection' maintains that the author does not authenticate or guarantee her (genuine-looking) assertions. The no-warrant objection maintains that even if fiction can afford significant true belief, it does not warrant belief, and knowledge requires warrant. (See Putnam 1978, p. 90; Olsen 1985, pp. 63–64.) Further, the artistic thesis is often developed positively in connection with the thematic thesis which maintains that the role of apparent

“truth-claims” in literature is to characterize the world of the work, for instance, its theme. I shall treat this connection later.

The proponents of the artistic thesis are right in arguing that it is not a definitive aim of artworks to convey truths. All literary fictions do not provide knowledge, for literature is not a constitutively cognitive practice.<sup>3</sup> However, some fictions, and even sub-genres of fiction, have an aim to make truth-claims, and recognizing this aim is essential in the appropriate response to the works. Typically, fables, parables and allegories are mentioned as types of fictions which are intended to make general claims and to instruct the reader. Moreover, literary criticism also acknowledges the author’s act of asserting. For instance, by ‘tendentious literature,’ it refers to a class of works which aim at changing readers’ beliefs, moral attitudes and even social conditions. One particular sub-genre of fiction which advances genuine claims is the thesis novel or novel of ideas. As thesis novels, one can mention works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Recognizing and understanding the thesis which a thesis novel makes is necessary for its proper literary understanding.

However, “assertive fictions” are not limited to didactic pieces and thesis novels. While thesis novels are paradigmatic assertive fictions, all fictions which advance knowledge-claims are not thesis novels. What is peculiar to the thesis novel is that in it the thesis the work makes is seen to comprehensively structure the story and to govern the plot. Many other works of fiction also have a central aim to make claims without subordinating the story to the claims. When it comes to the warrant objection, it is true that literary fictions do not warrant belief. As I try to argue in this paper, literary assertions have a peculiar status as speech acts: in general, the reader will recognize the author’s assertions, but authors are not typically held responsible for the assertions they make in their works.

## **1.2. The Fictive Mode of Speaking Argument**

The fictive mode of speaking argument is, in turn, a motley of ontological arguments that have in common the emphasis on the particular nature of the fictive utterance. The argument maintains, first, that the author’s mode of speaking differs from the assertive mode of

speaking employed in everyday conversation: unlike speakers in everyday conversation, literary authors intend their assertions not to be believed but entertained, imagined, or made-believe by the readers. This objection can be called *the fictive utterance thesis*.

Second, the argument maintains that the author's fictive mode of speaking postulates an implied speaker or a narrator who tells the story, and hence, that the assertions cannot be attributed to the actual author. In New Criticism, for instance, propositions expressed in fictions were considered utterances of a *persona* and not assertions of the author.<sup>4</sup> For instance, René Wellek and Austin Warren (1963, p. 25) suggest that assertions in fiction are not "literally true," for they are uttered by a fictional speaker. This objection can be called *the fictional speaker thesis*.

Third, the argument proposes that fictive utterances do not refer to the actual but a fictional world. It maintains that literary fictions and scientific articles, for example, depict different worlds: a scientific article claims truths about the actual world, whereas a literary fiction projects a world of its own: an assertion in a fiction is put forward by a fictional speaker and it refers to the self-sufficient imaginary world of the work (see e.g. Davies 1997, p. 4). A. C. Bradley (1901, p. 8), for one, has famously argued that the nature of poetry is to be "not a part, nor yet a copy of the real world" but "a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous." Michael Riffaterre (1978), in turn, argues that to say that fiction represents reality is to commit the 'referential fallacy.' Furthermore, Dorrit Cohn (1999, pp. 9–17) argues that fiction refers to the actual world often inaccurately, for the author fictionalizes actual events and objects and uses them as material for his artwork. This objection can be called *the fictional world thesis*. The fictive mode of speaking argument is, thus, threefold: first, it argues that fictive utterances are intended to be imagined or made-believe instead of believed, second, that the speaker of the work is not the author but a fictional character, and third, that assertions in a fiction are about the state of affairs in the fictional world of the work. As a conclusion, the thesis maintains that fictions cannot convey worldly truths.

Now, when speaking of assertions in fiction, one needs to make a distinction between the author's direct assertions and literary assertions. The so-called propositional theory of literary truth maintains that there are direct assertions in fiction, whereas a moderate version of the

theory suggests that such assertions should rather be considered fictitious in the first place. Let us consider first the author's direct assertions and then literary assertions.

### **1.2.1. Propositional Theory of Literary Truth**

In discussions on the propositional knowledge literary fictions convey, it has been customary to draw a distinction between the narrative sentences that constitute the fictional story and the author's assertions. For instance, Monroe C. Beardsley thought that fictions consist of two sorts of sentences: explicit (fictional) 'Reports' which report "the situation, the objects and events, of the story" and 'Reflections' or 'theses' in which "the narrator generalizes in some way, or reflects upon the situation" (Beardsley 1981a, p. 409). As examples of Reflections, Beardsley (ibid., p. 414) mentioned "Tolstoy's philosophy of history, the point made by Chaucer's Pardoner, 'Radix malorum est cupiditas,' and the morals of Aesop fables." Beardsley (ibid., p. 409; emphasis in original) also argued that if a work has "an *explicit* philosophy, like *War and Peace*," it shall be presented in the form of Reflections.<sup>5</sup> According to Beardsley's (ibid., p. 422) first proposal (which he, however, doubted), Reflections are not to be taken as assertions about the fictional world but rather as genuine assertions by which the author presents "some general views about life that he holds as a human being and wished to teach."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Gregory Currie argues that fictions may contain non-fictional sentences. According to Currie, a novelist may make statements intended for the reader to believe. For instance, Currie (1985, p. 391) suggests that Walter Scott "breaks off the narrative of *Guy Mannering* in order to tell us something about the condition of Scottish gypsies. And it is pretty clear that what he is saying he is asserting." In general, in the "breaking off the narrative" the author is seen to suspend the story-telling (typically in past tense) in order to make genuine claims (typically in present tense). In the cognitivist discussion in back decades, the author's judgements were generally considered generalizations, that is, statements in which the author was seen to "extrapolate" states of affairs in the actual world from fictional events. Recall, for instance, the cognitivists' classic example, the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all happy in the same way, unhappy families unhappy in their separate, different ways." Furthermore, many philosophers have argued that a novel, for instance, does not need to consist completely of fictional discourse, for authors may also include assertions in their

works (see e.g. Searle 1974; Juhl 1976; Reichert 1977; Graff 1979, 1980; Carroll 1992). Thus, the propositional theory maintains that there may be genuine assertions in fiction.

### **1.2.2. Moderate Propositional Theory of Literary Truth**

The proponents of the propositional theory of literary truth are right in claiming that evidently there are authors' assertions in fiction; the literary institution cannot prevent authors from including assertions in their works. However, the theory encounters major problems in answering the fictional speaker thesis and the fictional world thesis. The questions the propositional theory typically provokes in its defence of direct assertions – for instance, is there always a narrator in a work of fiction (or in an utterance in it) or can the actual author be the narrator of a fiction (or of an utterance in it) – can be said to be rather questions of a philosopher of language and cursory from a literary point of view. In addition, explicit assertions, such as generalizations, constitute only a small part of a fiction, and limiting the author's assertions to them really is not reasonable. There are authors' assertions in fiction which contain, for instance, reference to fictional characters, and hence cannot be considered the author's direct assertions; rather, they should be taken in a sense figurative.

In turn, the moderate version of the theory maintains that assertions in literary fiction are in the first place a fictional speaker's – the narrator's or a character's – assertions about the fictional world. Nevertheless, the theory maintains that assertions of a fictional speaker may also function as the author's genuine assertions. In other words, the author may perform or generate genuine acts by presenting the acts of a fictional speaker, or convey genuine assertions by expressing fictional assertions (see e.g. Sparshott 1967, pp. 3 & 6–7).

Dostoyevsky's novel *House of the Dead*, for instance, contains passages which can be considered autobiographical. What makes the work a novel instead of an autobiography, is that it is presented as fiction and its primary aim is to provide aesthetic experience.<sup>7</sup> However, the philosophical meditations on punishment, prisons, and the human nature, can be considered Feodor Dostoyevsky's genuine meditations which aim at conveying truth-claims and which are generally recognized as such. Now, for the moderate propositional cognitivist it does not pose a problem that assertions in literary fiction are uttered using the fictive mode of speaking, are asserted by a fictional character and perhaps embody fictional elements, such as

characters, events, and places. Different fictions, literary fictions included, are often used to convey an assertion or a message.

### **1.3. The Unity Argument**

The unity argument actually makes two theses, a logical and an aesthetic one. In general, the argument maintains that a fiction should not be divided into two parts, the story and the moral. First, it maintains that the content of a fiction cannot be logically divided into the story told by the speaker and assertions put forward by the author: if the assertions are part of the fiction (story), they are fictional; if they are genuine, they are not part of the fiction (see Margolis 1980, p. 271–273). In the same manner, Monroe C. Beardsley (1981b, pp. 301–304) argues that were there genuine assertions attributed to the author in a work of fiction, then the speaker of the work should be identified with the author, from which it would follow that all the speaker's properties should be ascribed to the author – which would lead to absurdities. Second, the unity argument maintains that an interpretation which considers certain assertions in a literary fiction as the author's assertions does not consider the work as (a coherent work of) literature; such an interpretation would be inappropriate from the literary point of view. Jerrold Levinson (1992, pp. 245–246), for one, makes the both claims in arguing that dividing a literary fiction into the fictional story told by the speaker and assertions put forward by the author would dismiss the literary features of the work (the aesthetic version of the argument) and make it something neither fiction nor non-fiction (the logical version of the argument).<sup>8</sup>

The moderate propositional theory of literary truth I argue for does not maintain that one should distinguish the author's assertions from the fictional story. Rather, I suggest that on the literal level, assertions in fiction are fictitious. As I see it, in the first place, assertions in fiction, also the apparently direct assertions, are to be attributed to a fictional speaker. Every sentence in the text of a work of fiction is a part of the fictional story. Fictive utterances, however, may function on two levels: as assertions of the fictional world and of reality.

This, nonetheless, is not to deny that there could not be assertions in fiction which are put forward and intended to be recognized only as the author's actual assertions, but to alert the reader of the 'aspectival' nature of assertions in fiction. Perhaps there might be didactic fictions, for instance, in which some assertions or even passages, such as the Preface, might

be meant to be attributed to the actual author. However, I argue that “direct” assertions in fiction also have a double reference: they both refer to the fictional world of the work and convey genuine propositions. As I see it, the reader should pay attention to the author’s literary role when interpreting peritexts, such as the Preface and the Author’s notes.

#### **1.4. The Literary Mode of Speaking Argument**

The literary mode of speaking argument, close to the fictive mode of speaking argument, is a collection of theses which stress the impossibility (or difficulty) of locating and extracting authors’ assertions in their works. Whereas the fictive mode of speaking argument maintains that truth-claiming in fiction is ontologically impossible, the literary mode of speaking argument admits its possibility, maintaining that the question is epistemological: how the author’s actual assertions can be identified? As some other arguments presented here, the literary mode of speaking argument has also been advanced in various formulations and it is discussed here in parts.

First, *the fictional voice thesis* maintains that a reader cannot be sure who is speaking in a work of fiction. The fictional voice thesis differs from the fictional speaker thesis discussed earlier in that the fictional voice thesis is not ontological but epistemological: it does not deny that character’s assertions could function as the author’s assertions but it emphasises the problems of recognizing the author’s actual assertions – how can we say that a certain voice in the novel really belongs to the actual author? – and their tone. Now, many if not most anti-cognitivists admit the existence of assertions in fiction. For them, the question is not whether it is possible for authors to make assertions in their works, but that there is no way to identify the assertions, or the author’s attitude toward them. For instance, Stein Haugom Olsen argues that many of the assertions in fiction are ‘indirect reflections,’ that is, assertions that seem to have an ironic tone, as the opening sentence of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, or are uttered by, “put into the mouth of,” a character who is unreliable. Olsen argues that this sort of assertions “must be interpreted further and they cannot be taken to represent the author’s meaning.” (Olsen 1985, p. 68.) Likewise, Peter Lamarque (2008, p. 233) suggests that the problem in taking philosophical statements in, for example, Shakespeare’s plays as the author’s truth-claims, is that the statements are made by characters and not “directly asserted”

by the author. Hence, Lamarque argues that one cannot know whether or not Shakespeare intends the statements as truths the reader should accept.

Second, *the context thesis* suggests that authors' actual assertions cannot be extracted from literary fictions. Lamarque, for one, argues that deriving truths from Shakespeare's plays is an inappropriate response to the works which misses their literary nature. As he sees it,

[t]he resonance the words have in the plays themselves, spoken by particular character at particular dramatic moments for specific dramatic ends, is lost, and this drains them of the distinctive literary interest their contexts supply. (Lamarque 2008, p. 233)

Lamarque (*ibid.*, p. 235) also claims that philosophical statements in a novel may have an ironic significance in their original context and this significance is lost when the statements are "crudely extracted," that is, applied in the assertive discourse. Moreover, another common formulation of the context thesis maintains that the precise reference of assertions in literary fiction gets lost when the assertions are extracted from the work.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the argument maintains that authors, literary artists, are free to express all sorts of beliefs in their works without committing themselves to the beliefs. Because literary interpretation, however, relies on the concept of the author as a normative structure of the work, for instance, in order to recognize an unreliable narrator, *the implied author thesis* maintains that the locus of beliefs expressed in the work has to be an 'implied' or 'postulated' author, a fictional entity between the actual author and the narrator.

Now, the fictional voice thesis is not completely misdirected, for it shows that the question of the author's act of assertion is actually epistemological: the problem is how one can tell which of the assertions the author has put into the mouth of a character are actually asserted by the author. In general, there are two ways of identifying authors' assertions: intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsically, assertions manifest themselves in the work. They are recognized by examining the tone of the work, the style of the narrative, the design of the work, and the like. In a truth-seeking interpretation, detecting the author's attitude toward the assertions she expresses in her work does not differ from interpreting utterances in everyday conversations.

In both cases, the interpreter aims at solving the author's aim by looking for her intention as it manifests itself in the utterance with the help of contextual evidence, conventions of communication, and so on. For example, Olsen's argument concerning "indirect assertions" only shows that assertions in fiction are not necessarily literal and have to be interpreted further; the question is about their tone. As J. O. Urmson (1976, p. 153) has insightfully put it, although "satirically-minded" or "with whatever malicious intent," the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* can be considered "a direct statement by Miss Austen to her readers." In turn, from an extrinsic point of view, assertions in a literary fiction are identified as the author's assertions by referring to her public biography, non-fictional writings and other relevant information about the author's actual beliefs.

The context thesis, in turn, attacks an imaginary practice of presenting complete literary works as compact morals – which hardly anyone practices – rather than points out a problem that would be characteristic to assertions in literary fiction only. After all, all assertions become indeterminate, banal, and proverbial when extracted from their original context. Consider, for instance, statements such as "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk," "God is dead," "The aim of philosophy is to shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle," "It is raining but I don't believe that it is," "Hell is other people," or "Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens." Without knowing their surrounding argumentative contexts, the assertions can hardly be grasped, at least as significant philosophical assertions. Further, a philosopher surely would hesitate in assessing them as true or false, for she would not know what is actually claimed and on which grounds. Naturally, literary assertions have some distinct contextual characteristics which I shall discuss later in this paper.

The implied author thesis illuminates an important feature in literature: that a fiction may seem to express beliefs which cannot be attributed to the actual author. However, the realm of such beliefs is, like the implied author itself, fictitious, and genuine beliefs and claims require a human agent. Truth-claims, in turn, must be attributed to a human agent, and if a work genuinely conveys something, it must be the actual author's view. Moreover, if "truth-claims" are considered genuine truth-claims established by the author, it is difficult to see how contradicting truth-claims might be a serious and general problem in literary truth-claiming. Taken that a person cannot simultaneously believe and claim that  $p$  and not- $p$ , apparent

conflicts of literary truths are to be solved by investigating the tone of the work.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to contradicting truth-claims in works by the same author, one can simply say that authors may change their views, just like philosophers, for instance.

### **1.5. The Communication Thesis**

The communication thesis can be considered a version of the literary mode of speaking argument, the fictional voice thesis in particular, expressed in terms of the philosophy of language. The (Gricean) background assumption of the thesis is that communication acts invite appropriate responses; that assertions, for example, invite assessment which is suggested by, besides non-semantic conventions, certain semantic markers, such as the declarative sentence form. Thus, the thesis maintains that in order there to be assertions in fiction, the author should manifest them.

Now, in addition to semantic characteristics of fiction, there are also pragmatic markers or conventions, such as the text "A Novel," on the front cover of the work which are considered to override the basic speech act rules and to suggest that, for instance, the declarative sentences in the work are intended not be believed but imagined unasserted by the reader. In order to claim truths, the author should somehow override the fictional pact (that the content of the work is intended to be imagined unasserted) she has established with the reader and signal which of the assertions in the work the reader should consider genuine.<sup>11</sup> However, the author is not able to indicate such a thing in the work, for everything included in the work is part of the fictional story, the thesis maintains. Therefore, the communication thesis concludes that one has no evidence to suppose that the author takes responsibility for fulfilling speech act conditions (besides reference, perhaps), for example, the sincerity condition which demands that she should believe her assertions to be true.

Here, several questions arise. Can there be assertions that do not manifest their assertive status? Can the author include in her work assertions which she believes to be true and which she intends the reader to assess? Or more broadly, can she include in her work assertions which she presents for the readers to be considered, entertained, or contemplated, as genuine assertions? Here, one needs to make a distinction between expressed, asserted and communicated propositions. First, in fiction there are a lot of propositions which the author

expresses but does not assert, for instance, philosophical propositions the author contemplates but does not claim. Second, there are, arguably, propositions the author believes to be true and puts forward as true. Such propositions can be called asserted propositions (in the Searlean sense of an assertion). Third, propositions the author believes to be true, puts forward as true and intends for the reader to recognize as true can be called communicated propositions (in the Gricean sense of an assertion). Of these three types, I shall examine here communicated propositions which I consider the only relevant group when discussing the author's act of literary truth-claiming.

### **1.6. Manifesting Acts of Assertion**

If fiction is considered a discourse able to contain assertions, the 'literary communication act' has to be defined. Perhaps the most prominent way of approaching literary communication is the Gricean intention-response model of communication which focuses on the origins of an utterance and the speaker's aims realized in the utterance. Now, in order to be a Gricean communication act, an assertion needs to fulfil certain rules. An assertion requires, for instance, that the speaker indicates that she is making an assertion which she believes to be true by manifesting her intention in the utterance. Further, what makes the intention a "Gricean" intention is that the speaker intends the audience to undertake the requisite belief (at least partly) as a result of recognizing the author's intention in the utterance.

In literary discourse, the problem is that the intention the author manifests in her overall fictive utterance is seen to rule out assertive intentions. For instance, Gregory Currie defines the fictive utterance in his seminal Gricean theory of fiction thus:

I want you to make believe some propositions *P*; I utter a sentence that means *P*, intending that you shall recognize that this is what the sentence means, and to recognize that I intend to produce a sentence that means *P*; and I intend you to infer from this that I intend you to make believe that *P*, and, finally, I intend that you shall, partly as a result of this intention, come to make believe that *P*. (Currie 1990, p. 31)

Now, if the author has invited the reader to make-believe the content of the work, how is she to signal that she is moving from fiction-making to asserting? To begin with, as I suggested earlier in this essay, the moderate propositional theory I argue for maintains that assertions in

fiction are part of the story. Thus, I argue that the author's fictive intention is present throughout the work; that the assertions in the work are intended to be imagined in the first place. Nevertheless, I suggest that there are literary assertions which have a 'double reference' and which convey genuine assertions.

Noël Carroll has proposed a broadly Gricean definition of 'film of presumptive assertion,' a sub-genre of non-fiction film, which, I think, can be applied to literary fiction. Carroll suggests that

*x* is a film of presumptive assertion if and only if the filmmaker *s* presents *x* to an audience *a* with the intention (1) that *a* recognizes that *x* is intended by *s* to mean that *p* (some propositional content), (2) that *a* recognizes that *s* intends them (*a*) to entertain *p* as an asserted thought (or as a set of asserted thoughts), (3) that *a* entertains *p* as asserted thought, and (4) that 2 is a reason for 3. (Carroll 1997, p. 188)

Literary assertions manifest both fictive and assertive intentions, and the author intends them to be entertained as both assertions of the fictional world and of reality. As a preliminary notion of the literary assertion I would like to suggest that in making a literary assertion, i) the author presents an utterance to an audience with the intention that the audience recognizes that the utterance is intended by the author to have a certain meaning; ii) that the audience recognizes that the author intends them to both imagine the content of the utterance as a narrative description that depicts a fictional world and to genuinely assess the proposition the narrative description conveys; iii) that the audience both imagines the meaning of the utterance as a description of a fictional world and entertains it as an asserted thought, iv) and, finally, that recognizing the author's invitation to such a response is a reason for the response.

Here, questions related to the propositional content of literary assertions and the reader's stance toward the content immediately arise. For instance, can a proposition be simultaneously imagined and entertained as true? And are there actually two propositions contained in a literary assertion, one intended to be imagined and the other to be entertained as true? I shall discuss these questions in the end of the paper when treating the logical status of literary assertions. What is of interest here is the way authors invite their readers to entertain propositions conveyed by literary assertions as asserted propositions.

The sad truth seems to be that there is no general rule, beyond the conventions that guide speakers in manifesting their intentions in utterances, to detect literary assertions in fiction. (And were there such a rule, it would be soon overridden by some author.) Nonetheless, some general guidelines may be sketched. In literary culture, authors' manifest their assertions by several narrative factors: the form and content of the utterance, the tone and style of the narrative and its manner of representation, the design of the work, and the like. Consider, for instance, these openings of works of Borges:

It may be said that universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors. The purpose of this note will be to sketch a chapter of this history. (Borges 1964a, p. 189.)<sup>12</sup>

In our dreams (writes Coleridge) images represent the sensations we think they cause; we do not feel horror because we are threatened by a sphinx; we dream of a sphinx in order to explain the horror we feel. (Borges 1964b, p. 240.)<sup>13</sup>

The form and content of these utterances clearly invite the reader to entertain them as a set of asserted thoughts, for they are in the indicative form and make assertions concerning (broadly) philosophical issues.<sup>14</sup> General philosophical propositions – particularly as opening sentences of a work – also question the sharp distinction between ‘fictional’ and ‘genuine’ entertainment of propositions. When reading sentences as those cited, the reader might not know whether she is reading a short story or a philosophical essay. (Were the works cited later discovered fiction, the narrator’s continuous references to actual philosophers and their views hardly make the reader to disentangle the extrinsic assessment of the philosophical views the opening has established.) Appeals to the reader’s expectations in reading philosophy and in reading fiction – whether the interpretation aims at aesthetic experience or truth – become feeble abstractions in cases in which there are, for instance, explicit philosophical discussion in fiction.

As I see it, assertions in fiction call for evaluation akin to assertions in everyday conversation. For instance, that the passage (which develops Coleridge’s philosophical view) –

It has been said that every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist. This is the same as saying that every abstract

contention has its counterpart in the polemics of Aristotle or Plato; across the centuries and latitudes, the names, faces and dialects change but not the eternal antagonists. (Borges 1964c, p. 146.)<sup>15</sup>

is presented in a fictional story does neither affect its sense nor make it less interesting than it would be if uttered in another context. Nevertheless, these sentences, considered as assertions in philosophical discourse and literary discourse function as different speech acts. Put in rough terms, in philosophical discourse, assertions are intended to claim truths, and the speaker of the work is generally the author. In literary discourse, in turn, assertions primarily characterize the fictional world of the work, and they cannot be attributed outright to the actual author. However, the author may make claims in her work. This is the peculiarity of literary asserting which I shall discuss in the end of the paper.

### **1.7. The Triviality Argument**

Akin to the literary mode of speaking argument, the triviality argument is also an epistemological argument. Whereas the literary mode of speaking thesis stresses issues concerning different voices in fiction and the context of literary assertions, the triviality argument focuses on the nature and value of ‘literary knowledge.’ The triviality argument also comes in many flavours. First, the argument questions the whole concept of literary knowledge by claiming that the truths fictions convey are trivial, inarticulate and inagreeable among readers (*the vagueness thesis*). Second, it claims that literary knowledge is not knowledge proper, because it does not make use of proper concepts (*the no-concept thesis*). Third, it argues that literary knowledge necessarily remains trivial, because fictions do not argue or provide reasons for the claims they make (*the no-argument thesis*), or support them with evidence (*the no-evidence thesis*). Fourth, it suggests that there is no distinct sort of knowledge such as literary knowledge and that the cognitive function of literary fiction is subordinate to other discourses (*the uniqueness thesis*).

First, the vagueness thesis maintains that truths to be learnt from fiction are banal, vague or inarticulate. Jerome Stolnitz (1992, p. 197) famously claims that the “truths” fictions express are mere banalities: for instance, both in Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the truth was “knowable and known” before the works, and nothing new was expressed in them. Further, Stolnitz (*ibid.*, pp. 193–194) maintains that the truth to be

learned from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* – “Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart” – is “pitifully meagre.” In turn, Peter Lamarque emphasizes the “vagueness” of literary truths. As he sees it, it is difficult to discern the truth-value of literary truths, for generalizations, for instance, are sometimes just too general. According to Lamarque (2008, p. 234), generalizations are “just as likely as proverbs to contradict each other.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Lamarque suggests that literary assertions, such as Shakespeare's generalization “All the world's a stage” in *As You Like It*, are often “metaphorical, and perhaps the best we can say is that the metaphor is apt and telling.” As a conclusion, he (*ibid.*, p. 234) suggests that perhaps generalizations should be considered “merely powerful prompters to get us to think along certain lines.” Finally, Stein Haugom Olsen (1985, p. 71) appeals to the practice of reading and suggests that when asked what truths a given great work of literature conveys, the answers are generally inarticulate or inagreeable among the audience. The notion suggests that either the generally accepted paraphrases of a work's thesis show that literary truths are trivial or, as the context thesis suggests, inseparable from the work.

The vagueness thesis can be easily shown inadequate. One should note that the so-called banality of literary truths actually stems from a straw-man-like attempt to produce a compact restatement of the meaning of a complete work.<sup>17</sup> However, making one sentence paraphrases, such as “Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart,” of literary works is not a part of the practice of truth-seeking interpretation. Indeed, such a condensation would flatten any sort of work, were it a work of philosophy, fiction or physics. For example, there is hardly a work of philosophy whose “meaning” would be agreeable among professional philosophers – especially should it be restated by a single sentence. (Those who disagree might try to formulate universally acceptable, cognitively significant single sentence paraphrases of, for instance, Hume's *Treatise*.)

Nonetheless, when considered in the light of the complete work, literary truths are far from trivial. The practice of reading shows that the truths people gain from literature are significant; consider, for instance, how people like Mill, Freud, and Wittgenstein have said to have learnt important truths from literature. Histories and encyclopaedias of philosophy also discuss the literary works of authors, such as Kierkegaard, Camus and Sartre. Furthermore,

when it comes to the excessive “generality” of assertions in fiction, one should note that while assertions in fiction might be too general in themselves, their surrounding narrative adjusts their extension (genuine reference). Here, one encounters again the role of context in interpreting assertions. Assertions in literary fiction, for instance, draw cognitive purport from other narrative sentences. For example, generalizations often just recap the story and explicitly state the theme of the work. Naturally, a generalization detached from the work and presented as an autonomous assertion is quite likely to be trivial – like any assertion drawn from a work of philosophy, as it was noted when examining the context thesis. As in utterances in general, the meaning of literary utterances in particular depends on their contextual features. Literary assertions are understood in the light of the context of the utterance, the utterer’s character, and the way the act of assertion is depicted. This is not to say that literary assertions could not be paraphrased, but that paraphrasing them generally requires explicating their contextual features, such as the utterer’s character.

Second, the no-concept thesis maintains that literary truths are banal, because knowledge is tied to the use of proper concepts and because fictions neither make use of them nor introduce new concepts. Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (2006, xii) formulate the no-concept thesis hereby: How can one say that Orwell’s *1984* conveys a message that individualism becomes suppressed in totalitarianism, if the point is not explicated in the work itself? After all, the word “totalitarianism” does not exist on the pages of the book. Kieran and Lopes think that the *cognitivist’s dilemma* is that either the readers already believe the point the work conveys or they do not: if they do, then art is trivial (the vagueness thesis); if they do not, then the question is what ties the state of affairs in the world of fiction to the truth about the actual world (the no-concept thesis).

The no-concept thesis can be refuted by, to begin with, noting that there are literary fictions which explicitly address the problem they examine and make use of concepts, such as “Pierre Menard” which explicitly discusses the role of a work’s historical background in literary interpretation, or, for example, existentialist fiction which discuss the (“inarticulate”!) feelings of angst and anxiety. Nevertheless, most “cognitively valuable” fictions do not employ technical concepts or terms related to the issue they treat. Rather, the truth that people learn from literary fiction suggests that literary knowledge does not depend on the explicit use of

proper terms but that it implies them. John Gibson (2007, pp. 101–102), for one, insightfully suggests that fictions “illuminate” readers’ understanding of concepts, “operate upon” truths and “fulfil” the knowledge they already possess. As he (*ibid.*, p. 114–115) sees it, instead of telling one about what jealousy is, Othello’s behaviour illuminates one’s understanding of it.<sup>18</sup> According to Gibson (*ibid.*, p. 117), literature contextualizes concepts and presents them to readers in concrete form.

Third, the no-argument thesis maintains that literary knowledge is trivial, because literary fictions do not reason the assertions they make or support them with evidence (see Beardsley 1981a, p. 429; Stolnitz 1992, pp. 196–197). For instance, Stolnitz (1992, p. 196) argues that because literary works are unable to reason their claims, the “literary truths” derived from the works remain a set of proverbial notions that may simply override each other. In turn, the no-evidence thesis maintains that because fictions do not argue for the assertions they make or imply, the validation has to be achieved by referring to some independent sources, such as the author’s non-fictional writings or state of affairs in the real world (Margolis 1980, p. 270; see also Stolnitz 1992, pp. 196–197). Hence, the proponents of the thesis argue that literary truths do not actually derive from the fictional work but the extra-fictional sources.

Proponents of the no-argument thesis are right in that while literary fictions contain and imply truth-claims, these truth-claims are not reasoned as in, for example, philosophy. Instead, literary fictions rely on rhetorical argumentation. Works of literary fiction persuade readers of their truths enthymematically: they imply the deliberately omitted conclusion or premise; the work suggests the unstated part of the rhetorical argument and the reader fills it in. (Naturally, a reader may appeal to the author’s non-fictional writings or state of affairs in the actual world to validate the truths in the work, but this is to explicate what is implicit, or deliberately omitted, in the work; literary persuasion depends on the reader who is invited to fulfil what is unstated in the enthymeme.)

Further, Stolnitz’s objection which maintains that literary truths may contradict each other, for there is no method for solving the contradiction, may be questioned by remarking that authors who make assertions in their work generally attempt to persuade their readers of their points. The difference between literature and philosophy is just that they use different ways in

persuading their audiences: philosophy prefers argument, whereas literature favours different forms of rhetorical argumentation. Literary fiction, for instance, prefers illustration and appeal to emotion; it shows-that *p*, shows-how *p* and shows-what-it-would-be-like if *p*. Moreover, both in philosophy and literature, it is ultimately the reader who considers which of the several alternative views provides the best grounds for believing in it.

In turn, the no-evidence thesis which concerns the validation of literary truths, can be shown inadequate by noting that when literary fictions are considered roughly similar to hypotheses or philosophical thought experiments, their lack of “genuine” evidence does not make them cognitively insignificant. One should note that the no-evidence thesis deals with empirical evidence, and literary works are generally seen to provide types of knowledge in which empirical evidence is not considered important, such as on moral philosophical issues.

Fourth, the uniqueness thesis maintains that literary fictions’ ability to transmit factual knowledge is unlike to illuminate the cognitive significance of literature *qua* literature. The thesis maintains that even if literary fiction could warrant important true beliefs, it does not convey them in any distinctive manner. It has been argued, for instance, that the propositional cognitive gains of a historical novel, conveyed through narrative descriptions, is not distinctive of the work as a literary work; same truths could be achieved, yet more efficiently, from a work of history (see Stolnitz 1992, p. 191–192 & 196; see also Diffey 1997, p. 210). Further, the thesis maintains that different ‘cognitive practices’ have their distinct scopes: it claims that philosophy, for instance, has its own methods and objects of study, whereas literature does not. Hence, the uniqueness thesis maintains that the cognitivist’s task is to explain, first, the distinctive cognitive value of fiction, and second, its methods and objects of study. (See Kieran & Lopes 2006, xiii–xiv.)

Literary fictions, nonetheless, have their distinct manners of conveying knowledge. The uniqueness of literary knowledge is gained by several characteristics of which I shall mention here only a few: the literary narrative form which includes the narrator and the multiplicity of viewpoints, illustration, and the elaborateness of literary representation.<sup>19</sup> First, the literary narrative form provides features which distinguish literary fictions from other narratives. Literary fictions may, for example, make use of an omniscient narrator who is able to depict

the train of characters' thoughts. Such a narrator may discuss, for instance, characters' motives, intentions, thoughts, and feelings, and thus make the treatment of the subject more detailed and full. Further, fictions often present multiple viewpoints in examining, for instance, ethical questions. And unlike philosophers' dialogues such as those of Plato, literary fictions generally aim at representing characters' viewpoints as thorough or "autonomous" views without roughly subordinating them to the thesis of the work.<sup>20</sup> Second, literary fictions may illustrate, for instance, a philosophical issue by showing what it would be in a certain situation, or what it would be like to feel in a certain way. Third, literary fictions are elaborate, which is appreciated when they are considered thought experiments.

For instance, Noël Carroll (2002, pp. 18–19) suggests that the elaborateness of 'literary thought experiments' is a cognitive virtue, because they expose "hidden motives and feelings of the agent" better than those of philosophers. Moreover, Eileen John (2003, pp. 150–157) suggests that while elaborateness may sometimes make it hard for the reader to tell what is the relevance and integrity of fictional particulars to (general) philosophical issues, the details may also steer the reader toward philosophical concerns. Colin McGinn (1996, p. 3), in turn, suggests that fictions are interesting because they combine the universal and the particular in intelligible way. Finally, Catherine Z. Elgin (2007, pp. 48–49) argues that philosophers' thought experiments are "sometimes unconvincing because they are so austere." Further, Elgin (*ibid.*, p. 50) suggests that fictions do not need to present paradigm cases but they may also show extreme cases and thus reveal "aspects of things that are normally obscured." What comes to the Harean fear of not distinguishing the essential features, that is, features relevant to the philosophical issue, from the accidental features, that is, fictional particulars, a common reader surely realizes what is relevant to the issue. However, in the strict sense, literature does not have distinct methods of study. Besides offering propositional and non-propositional knowledge, literary fictions deploy distinctive artistic methods to clarify one's understanding of different issues so that people come to see the things in a new light (see Kieran 1996; Kieran 2004; Carroll 1998a), "enhance" or "enrich" the reader's knowledge (Graham 2000), or help the reader acknowledge things (Gibson 2003; Gibson 2007).

Finally, the question of the triviality of literary knowledge depends on what one means by 'philosophy.' Peter Kivy, for one, notes that the banality thesis is put forward by academics,

mostly philosophers and literary critics, to whom literary truths are “old hat.” Kivy reminds one that academics are neither the only nor the principal audience at which fictions are aimed. Rather, fictions are aimed at “a general, educated public,” who might encounter a certain philosophical issue first in a fiction (Kivy 1997a, pp. 20–21; see also Carroll 2002, pp. 8–9).

### **1.8. The Thematic Argument**

The thematic argument is a positive version of the artistic thesis or, as a matter of fact, a theory of the core of literary interpretation. As to assertions in fiction, the argument maintains that they are best considered explicit thematic statements which serve an aesthetic purpose and structure the artistic content – the theme – of the work. According to Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, perhaps the most well-known supporters of the thematic approach today, thematic statements are propositions which “express generalizations or judgements based on or referring to these described situations, events, characters, and places,” (Lamarque & Olsen 1994, p. 324) some, but not all, of them being in the form of “general statements” similar to Beardsleyan theses (ibid., p. 402). Furthermore, Lamarque and Olsen (ibid., pp. 324–325) argue that thematic statements are either explicit or implicit: explicit thematic statements occur in themselves in the work, whereas implicit thematic statements are extracted from the work and formulated by the reader in the act of interpretation. Here, I shall limit my examination to explicit thematic statements.

Now, Lamarque and Olsen suggest that often thematic statements are not asserted by the author, and argue that thematic statements can be assigned significance without being construed as the author’s assertions (ibid., pp. 328–329). Elsewhere, Lamarque argues that because the author’s commitment to the propositions varies from case to case, readers are not automatically invited to accept them as true but to entertain them. He also suggests that although thematic statements seem to carry the reader beyond the fictional world and invite her consideration as reflections on the actual world, they should be primarily taken as “thematic guides or clues to understanding the characters.” (Lamarque 1996, p. 94.) Following Lamarque and Olsen, John Gibson (2007, p. 93) claims that while thematic statements elicited from a literary work may be true of reality, the worldly truth of thematic statements is unclaimed by the text.

Moreover, Lamarque and Olsen argue that the truth-seeking interpretation arrives at banalities because it ignores the context in which literary assertions (thematic statements) occur. Lamarque and Olsen argue that the truth-seeking view which maintains that an assertion such as the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* could be considered a truth-claim, is “patently inadequate, even naïve, from the literary point of view, with its added dimensions of value and interpretation.” According to them, the sentence has “little or nothing to do with trying to induce a belief in a reader about happy and unhappy families,” and it is rather “an initial characterization of a theme which gives focus and interest to the fictional content.” (Lamarque & Olsen 1994, pp. 66–67.) Again elsewhere, Lamarque similarly argues that a certain philosophical statement by Bradley Pearson in Iris Murdoch’s *Black Prince* is ironic and functions “primarily as a thematic statement characterizing one of the themes [...] and offering a range of philosophical concepts to apply to the work as a whole” (Lamarque 2008, p. 235).

Furthermore, Lamarque claims that besides their function, also the content and truth of statements in literary fiction differ in thematic interpretation, which aims at illuminating the work and underlying its themes to make sense of it, and truth-seeking interpretation, which looks for insight into human lives (ibid., pp. 236–237). He suggests that as a thematic statement, a statement in fiction is not banal, for it connects to the theme of the work, but as a truth-claim the very same sentence is, because a truth-claim should – for some rather odd reason – stand on its own feet. For instance, Lamarque argues that the value of Dickens’s novel *Our Mutual Friend* is “in the working of the theme” (which is, according to Lamarque, that money corrupts), not in “the theme’s bare propositional content” which he considers banal. (ibid., p. 239.)

All in all, Lamarque and Olsen present a nice group of arguments. To sum up their main theses, they claim that i) the function of statements in literary fiction is to structure the theme of the work; ii) often the general propositions in fiction are not asserted by the author; iii) considered as the author’s assertion, a statement in fiction would be naïve, whereas as a thematic statement it would not; iv) statements in fiction may be assigned significance (as thematic statements) or entertained without considering them truth-claims; v) statements in

fiction may be true of the work when taken as thematic statements but false of the world when taken as genuine assertions.

Now, arguments of this sort are to a high degree addressed against strictly propositional theories of literary truth whose problems they illustrate well. However, the arguments do not apply to the moderate propositional view. As noted, the moderate propositional theory maintains that statements in fiction have a dual purpose. Once again: in addition to structuring the theme of the work, assertions in fiction may function as the author's assertions. On the contrary, the thematic approach, in emphasizing the thematic level essential to literary works, easily dismisses the focal, conversational function of literature. Also, while thematic statements are not *stricto sensu* claimed by the work of the world, they might convey the authors' assertions; after all, the fictional or literary nature of a work is not an obstacle to asserting.

Third, the thesis which maintains that the content of sentences in fiction would differ whether they were considered thematic statements or literary assertions, is simply absurd. How does the author's, or alternatively the reader's, propositional attitude towards a literary utterance affect on the content of the literary utterance? In no way. The only difference between a thematic statement and a literary assertion is that the latter is also considered to have assertive force. Berys Gaut, for one, insightfully turns the issue around by noting that Kundera's general views about psychology and history, for instance, "the ruminations on the significance of the fact that we live our lives only once" in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, are not banal, for they structure the complete work (Gaut 2007, p. 172). Thus, literary assertions need not stand on their own feet but they may also connect to themes. And as noted in the triviality argument, the apparent banality of literary assertions is caused by making compact restatements of works. Lamarque and Olsen's paraphrases of themes of literary works also oversimplify works' thematic contents;<sup>21</sup> the thematic statements Lamarque and Olsen formulate in their studies are trivial and vague. Now, as will be shown later in the paper, certain kinds of literary assertions are not meant to be presented as autonomous statements; if their context is of relevance to understanding them, the context should also be paraphrased.

Fourth, thematic statements can admittedly be assigned significance without construing them as truth-claims. Their content can be entertained without judging whether or not they are asserted. It is also true that statements in fiction, considered literary assertions, cannot be considered outright “as is,” but that their tone, for instance, must always be assessed. What, then, does it matter to whom, if any, a literary assertion is attributed? Let us briefly consider expressed unasserted propositions. When writing a philosophical fiction, the author composes a work which contains philosophical propositions. However, in order to convey knowledge, the propositions need not to be claimed by the author. When writing fiction, the author does not bind herself to the truth of the propositions even if she believes them or has beliefs similar to them. A proposition, which a statement in a fiction conveys, may be, for instance, an exaggerated version or an opposite of the author’s opinion, or represent some aspect of her thought. Fictions admittedly contain a lot of ‘contemplative propositions’ which can be considered neither assertions nor suggestions of the author.

Nonetheless, in many instances we are interested in the “message,” such as the philosophical meaning, of a work; we are concerned with what the author has to say about issues important to us. When attending to a truth-seeking interpretation of Sartre’s *Nausea*, for instance, we are looking for the philosophical meaning of the work, that is, the meaning determined by the author. This act can be called *interpretation as retrieval*, and its focus is the meaning of the work. Nevertheless, literary readings often produce thoughts beyond the meaning of the work – for instance, contemplation on issues related to the moment of interpretation. This act can be called *creative interpretation*, and its focus is the applied meaning or the significance of the work to the reader. Now, both types of interpretation need to attribute the philosophical points they derive from the work to someone. All in all, in order for there to be knowledge, there must be, put in rather rough terms, a human agent who believes a certain justified true thought-content. And if the thought-content is not stated by the author, the reader needs to perform the act of assertion herself.

Finally, assertions in fiction may certainly be true of the world of the work but false of reality. Pessimistic generalizations about human nature, for instance, may aptly describe the state of affairs in a certain saturnine fictional world.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the truth-seeker’s question is: what does the author intend to do, besides her artistic act, by depicting such a dark work and claiming such

things, why does she portray such events. However, before examining the nature of literary assertions, I shall discuss the literary practice argument which can be considered an institutional version of the artistic thesis introduced in the beginning of the essay.

### **1.9. The Literary Practice Argument**

The literary practice argument maintains that assessing assertions in fiction genuinely, i.e. extra-literarily, as true or false is not a part of literary interpretation. In their thematic account, Lamarque and Olsen maintain that the proper way to approach literary fictions is to aesthetically appreciate their thematic content. To begin with, Lamarque and Olsen argue that the absence of a debate on the worldly truth of thematic statements in the critical practice suggests that discussing the truth of literary assertions is not a feature of the literary practice itself (Lamarque & Olsen 1994, pp. 332–333). Respectively, Lamarque argues elsewhere that because critics rarely move from thematic interpretation to debating the worldly truth of thematic statements, this implies that engaging in, for example, philosophical debate on the theme of a literary work is not part of “the ‘practice’ of reading” (Lamarque 2008, p. 237). He also claims that debating the worldly truth of assertions in literary fiction is unsophisticated activity which ignores the implied speaker and tone and status of the work (Lamarque 2006, pp. 134 & 136; see also Olsen’s similar views in Olsen 1973, pp. 227–229; Olsen 1981, pp. 531–533; Olsen 1985, p. 58; Olsen 2000, pp. 29, 31, 33–34 & 39–41). As Lamarque sees it, those who give their primary interest to the discovery of propositional truths in literary fiction cannot be considered subtle readers (Lamarque 2008, p. 239).

The literary practice argument is, nonetheless, misguided in several ways. First, a proper literary response includes recognition of the author’s public aims, including her conversational intentions. As suggested in the beginning, there are sub-genres of fiction in which the author’s act of making genuine assertions is an essential part of her literary task; respectively, assessing the truth of the assertions is part of the literary appreciation of such a work. For instance, Noël Carroll remarks that it is an essential part of the literary task of a realist novelist — ‘realism’ considered here not a historical genre but a manner of representation — to accurately observe the social milieu she depicts. In proportion, Carroll suggests that it is part of the literary response of a realist novel to approach the work in terms of social and psychological insight the work is meant to deliver. (Carroll 2007, p. 32 & 36.)

Second, the practice of academic criticism does not determine the nature of literary practice. Peter Kivy, among others, notes that the place for analysis and argument in the literary practice is in the readers' minds (Kivy 1997a, p. 22). Kivy remarks that although assessing the worldly truth of thematic statements is not practiced by academic critics, it is commonly practiced by general readers in their act of appreciation. Moreover, he argues that the critics' task is to explicate to the general readers the thematic statements the work directly or indirectly makes (which the readers, in turn, assess) (Kivy 1997b, pp. 122 & 125). But Kivy has an even more important insight: a special characteristic of literary appreciation, its temporal dimension. As he notes, literary experience is often "gappy": large novels, for instance, are read in parts. Further, Kivy notes that literary appreciation has an "afterlife" akin to aftertaste in wine experience: appreciation continues after the book has been finished. As Kivy sees it, readers are meant to consider the truth and falsity of thematic statements, as part of the artistic effect of the work, in the gaps and afterlife of literary appreciation. (Kivy 1997a, p. 23.) And as Kivy remarks, when a reader is pondering serious issues raised by a novel after reading it, she is still enjoying the work (Kivy 1997b, pp. 131–134). Kivy's notion of the literary experience is felicitous, and it is easy to find support for it – not only through one's personal experience but also by noting that publishing literary works as serials has been a significant practice in the literary tradition. Finally, Lamarque's appeal to the "simplicity" of truth-seeking approaches is, again, outdated. A moderate propositional approach, such as a conversational philosophical interpretation of Sartre's *Nausea*, neither excludes the appreciation of the work in its search for the author's intended meaning nor ignores the implied speaker or the style and tone of the work in evaluating Sartre's truth-claims.

## **2. Characteristics of Literary Assertions**

Literary assertions have special features that distinguish them from assertions of ordinary discourse. These are their semantic and aspectival features and illocutionary force. Literary assertions i) are performed by a fictional character and ii) often embody fictional elements, such as, reference to fictional characters, places, or events. In this paper, I have argued that assertions in literary fiction should be taken in the first place as assertions of a fictional character, and hence suggested that the assertions should be considered literary assertions. In

turn, the illocutionary force of literary assertions, as I try to illustrate, refers to their peculiar character as speech acts.

### **2.1. Semantic Features**

Literary assertions are akin to metaphors in the sense that they both have a dual-layered meaning.<sup>23</sup> For example, on a literal level, literary assertions that make reference to non-existent entities would most likely be false if assessed as assertions (I say most likely, so that the hairsplitting logician would not remind me of that “No man is an island.”) If assessed literally, the sentence “Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution” would be false, for there is no Menard who had invented a literary technique.<sup>24</sup> However, on another, ‘figurative’ level, literary assertions are intended to be assessed and may be true. Taken figuratively, the sentence proposes that the historical background of a literary work plays a substantial role in determining the meaning of the work. So, when encountering a literary assertion, the reader is intended, by the author, to perform two acts: i) to imagine the proposition  $P_1$  that depicts the fictional world of the work and ii) to genuinely, i.e. extra-fictionally, assess the proposition  $P_2$  which the proposition  $P_1$  conveys.

In addition to their dual-layered meaning, literary assertions are often semantically dense in a distinct way. They may, for instance, employ fictional concepts whose meaning is constructed by the descriptions and other utterances that constitute the story. A literary assertion may contain, for instance, a reference to a fictional character (including indexicals),<sup>25</sup> which functions as a concept or symbol and thus gives the literary assertion a surplus of meaning because of the content of the concept. Sometimes fictional concepts such as characters shift into metaphors (or iconic characters) in language, as people characterize each other Faustus, Don Quijotes, Don Juans, Robinson Crusoes, and Bartlebys

### **2.2. Aspectival Features**

The aspectival features of literary assertions must be taken into consideration when evaluating them. Literary assertions may be presented, for instance, by an unreliable character so that they have an ironic tone as the author’s assertions. There are also, for instance, philosophical

statements in fiction which should not be taken to express the author's beliefs because of the features of the character who makes the statements. Hence, when attending a truth-seeking interpretation, readers should look for signs that show whether the speaker who performs the assertions in the work should or should not be taken to be expressing the author's views.

Viewpoints related to literary assertions can be, roughly, divided into three groups: i) fictional speaker as the author's mouthpiece, ii) fictional speaker as a part of the author's assertion act, and iii) the interplay of speakers. The distinction is arbitrary, and it is intended to rather illustrate the aspectival features of literary assertions than to classify them. The most obvious case of asserting in fiction is that in which a fictional speaker functions as the author's mouthpiece. In instructive fiction, such as philosophers' fictional dialogues and didactic literary fiction, an author often makes use of an author surrogate, a character who expresses the beliefs, views, and morality of the author. In philosophy, there is, for instance, Plato's Socrates and Hume's Philo. In fiction, in turn, an author surrogate is often the main character and/or the narrator of the work, for instance, the narrator of Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead* or Camus's *Fall*.

While a large part of so-called assertive fiction makes use of an author surrogate, there is also a large group of literary fictions in which an individual character does not directly represent the author's views but should rather be examined as a part of the author's overall assertion act (although the author might more or less identify with the character). Consider, for instance, Joseph Garcin's famous line "[...] Hell is – other people" in Sartre's *No Exit*.<sup>26</sup> When investigating Garcin's utterance, the moderate propositional theory pays attention to the aspectival features of the utterance: it notices that Garcin does not clearly understand the events around him and that in the context of the overall work, the assertion, considered as Sartre's assertion, should be considered ironic and part of the statement or thesis the work as a whole makes.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the characters of *No Exit* serve — in a traditional philosophical interpretation — the existentialist point Sartre is making by the work, there are philosophical fictions which have more complex structures and which seem to embody alternative views. This type of literary asserting may be called the interplay of speakers. Now, Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*

and Mann's *Magic Mountain*, for example, clearly advance philosophical points. Furthermore, these works seem to express several "autonomous" philosophies: in the former, there are, for instance, the views of Alyosha, Dmitri and Ivan; in the latter, the views of Naphta, Settembrini, and the narrator, the protagonist Hans Castorp. Nonetheless, in cases of this kind, particular views, such as Alyosha's philosophy of life, cannot be outright attributed to the actual author. More like, a character's view should be considered suggestive or elliptical to the actual author's view, or the author's point should be formed as a synthesis or combination of the particular views.<sup>28</sup> The author's philosophical message should be constructed by investigating what the work as a whole suggests and examining issues such as its tone and plot.<sup>29</sup>

### **2.3. The Illocutionary Force of Literary Assertions and the Reader's Stance Toward Them**

As noted earlier, literary assertions are akin to metaphors, for the point they make is not in general the one stated literally but the one stated "figuratively." Moreover, like the so-called cognitive content of an assertive metaphor, the assertion which a literary assertion conveys may be formulated in several correct or apt ways. Literary assertions, however, differ from assertive metaphors used in ordinary discourse in that because of her poetic license, the author is not committed to the general speech act rules or conversational maxims: She is not expected to endorse the propositions put forward; yet, she may do so. Moreover, although she may make genuine claims, she is not generally held responsible for what she is taken to state. Some philosophers have come to suggest that the illocutionary force of assertions in fiction is somehow weaker than assertions in ordinary discourse. Anders Pettersson, for one, maintains that if one says that there can be statements in "genuinely literary contexts," one has to admit that "their affirmative character is weakened and somewhat dubious" and that one is rather dealing with 'aetiologies' than 'full-blown assertions' (Pettersson 2000, p. 122). The way by which a statement in fiction conveys the author's assertion is sometimes difficult to define. Obviously, both linguistic and literary conventions play a focal role in interpreting literary assertions, for instance, in constructing their meaning. However, I would like to briefly discuss the definition of the literary assertion in order to specify its function and especially the reader's attitude toward it.

To begin with, the terms ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ and the metaphor analogy used earlier in this paper in illustrating the two levels of literary assertions are helpful but inexact, because literary assertions may, for example, figuratively construct the fictional world (say, by a metaphorical utterance) and because the fictional and assertive levels of a literary assertion may be identical: a literary assertion may make the same claim or suggestion on both levels. Hence, I shall propose the terms ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ viewpoint: the former refers to the fictional level of a literary assertion, whereas the latter refers to the assertive level of a literary assertion. In producing literary assertions, the author intends the very same utterance to function as a twofold assertion which states one thing about the work’s fictional world and another thing about reality.

Now, a question arises: what is the reader’s overall attitude, her mental state, towards literary assertions? Here, it has been suggested that the paradigmatic theories of fiction, the make-believe theories proposed by Walton, Currie and Lamarque and Olsen, are inadequate in explaining the reader’s stance. It has been noted that the make-believe theories come into conflict in cases in which the reader encounters stated, implied or even unasserted true propositions in fiction, because the theories maintain that — make-believe being the reader’s comprehensive attitude toward the content of the work — she should make-believe the propositions she believes or knows to be true. However, a proposition believed or known to be true by the reader cannot be consistently also made-believe in the sense the make-believe theories maintain, that is, made-believe and not believed. (Carroll 1991, p. 544; New 1996, pp. 160 & 162; John Gibson 2007, pp. 164–170.)

The problem of make-believe theories is that they suggest that assertions in fiction are to be made-believe, that is, imagined being true. Nonetheless, the author’s literary-fictive use of language is not just everyday language stripped of its assertive force, but a mode of speaking of its own. The issue which the make-believe theory ignores is that while fictive utterances are not primarily assertive of the actual world, they are something positive: they are assertive of a fictional world (uttered by a certain speaker and from her point of view). As I see it, the solution to the problem lies exactly in the double reference of literary assertions: intrinsically, they are descriptive of a fictional world, whereas extrinsically they are descriptive of reality. Or, to put it in another words, literary assertions are used by the author to perform different

acts. For example, a general philosophical statement in a work of fiction, which the author genuinely makes, claims a proposition or a set of propositions true of the fictional world and true of the actual world; it is simultaneously used in performing the act of fiction-making and the act of truth-claiming.

### **Conclusion**

The borders between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ imagination, entertaining a proposition as asserted of a fictional world and entertaining it as asserted of reality, are often vague – consider, for example, the reader’s mental state in encountering (general) philosophical propositions in fiction. Nevertheless, I think that the view I have sketched is apt, if we considered fiction-making as an act, in which the author invites the reader to entertain a set of thoughts of the state of affairs in an imaginary world. Moreover, the account I have sketched explains, for instance, how a certain proposition may be true of the fictional world and yet false of reality.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> By assertions, I mean sentences that are used in putting forward general non-trivial propositions; typically, cognitivist theories of literary truth-claiming focus on general propositions about human existence. In turn, by 'literary fiction' (and by the elliptical expression 'fiction') I mean aesthetically valuable works of imaginative literature.

<sup>2</sup> Another popular version of the artistic thesis maintains that art is hostile to truth (considered as 'scientific truth') and that the author's act of assertion downplays the literary value of her work. For instance, Peter Lamarque (2008, p. 253) argues that didactic works, that is, works that are "overt in their teaching aim," are generally valued low by critics. However, the existence and cognitive relevance of truth-claims in literary fiction and the literary value of fictional works which make assertions are distinct issues. In the literature and truth discussion, 'cognitivism' advances an epistemic thesis which maintains literary fictions convey knowledge, whereas 'aesthetic cognitivism' makes an artistic thesis which maintains that the knowledge-claims a fiction makes increase its literary value. In this paper, I argue for cognitivism which maintains that i) some fictions make assertions, ii) these assertions generally have a peculiar character, and iii) that assessing assertions in literary fiction is part of the literary appreciation of the work.

<sup>3</sup> As Berys Gaut (2007, p. 180) notes, no-one really argues for ‘cognitivist essentialism’ which would maintain that it is a constitutive end of the practice of literature that it aims at truth. In turn, Peter Kivy notes that “the expression of [genuine] propositions is neither the sole purpose of *any* literary work nor a purpose at all of *many* literary works” (Kivy 1997a, p. 17; emphasis in original).

<sup>4</sup> The Latin word *persona* means masks actors wore or characters they played.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, J. O. Urmson (1976, p. 153) argues that one sort of truth which commonly occurs in fiction is “the direct statement of the author, [*in propria persona*, to his reader.” In turn, the literary critic Seymour Chatman (1980, pp. 243–244) suggests that besides fictional sentences, fictions may contain “general truths,” “philosophical observations that reach beyond the world of the fictional work into the real universe,” which he also calls “factual assertions.”

<sup>6</sup> One should, however, note that Beardsley considered both the distinction between Reports and Reflections and the author’s assertion act problematic. Further, he also thought that Reflections should perhaps rather be taken as statements unasserted by the author and part of the story and the narrator’s discourse (see *ibid.*, p. 422–423).

<sup>7</sup> Actually, literary critics have argued that Dostoyevsky, by means of the narrator’s meditations on the liberal nature of punishment in his “contemporary Russia,” wants to explicitly distinguish himself from the story.

<sup>8</sup> The propositional theory is not, nonetheless, entirely misguided in asking that if the existence of multiple narrators in a work does not break its artistic integrity, why could not the author be one of the narrators; why could not the “authorial voice” belong to the actual author?

<sup>9</sup> Some anti-cognitivists refer here to the artistic thesis, claiming that because it is difficult or impossible to recognize authors’ assertions in their works and because extracting them seems to lose their contextual relevance, this shows that truth is not an issue in literary interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, recognizing the author’s actual claims may sometimes be difficult. For instance, Kierkegaard’s works such as *Either/Or* are interplay of philosophical views, and locating the actual author’s, Søren Kierkegaard’s, view conveyed by the work – what he intends to say by the work as a whole – is not easy.

<sup>11</sup> Naturally, author’s paratextual declarations, such as claims concerning the origins of the story, have to be regarded with suspicion

<sup>12</sup> “Quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas. Bosquejar un capítulo de esa historia es el fin de esta nota.” (Borges 1976, p. 14.)

<sup>13</sup> “En los sueños (escribe Coleridge) las imágenes figuran las impresiones que pensamos que causan; no sentimos horror porque nos oprime una esfinge, soñamos una esfinge para explicar el horror que sentimos.” (Borges 1998)

<sup>14</sup> M. W. Rowe (1997, p. 320) notes that if the function of general propositions in literature would be to alert the reader to the themes of the work, then they would not need to be in the universal form. Further, Rowe claims that “it seems essential, and is clearly part of the author’s intention in using the universal form” that general propositions would “refer beyond the page of the novel.” This is because authors “will often want to show what aspects of their characters’ behaviour are unique to the individual, and which are typical of human nature generally.” Actually, Rowe goes so far as to claim that a general proposition in literature is like a general proposition anywhere: “if there are no special reasons for thinking otherwise, it is asserted, and it means what it says.”

<sup>15</sup> “Se ha dicho que todos los hombres nacen aristotélicos o platónicos. Ello equivale a declarar que no hay debate de carácter abstracto que no sea un momento de la polémica de Aristóteles y Platón; a través de los siglos y latitudes, cambian los nombres, los dialectos, las caras, pero no los eternos antagonistas.” (Borges 1985, pp. 90–91.)

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Lamarque (2006, p. 137) suggests that it is often difficult to demonstrate general propositions in literature true or false.

<sup>17</sup> This point has been made or suggested by philosophers, such as Gaskin (1995, p. 399), Conolly & Haydar (2001, pp. 110–111 & 122), and Carroll (2007a, p. 36).

<sup>18</sup> Gibson notes that the cognitive gains of Othello do not lie in giving the reader knowledge of the world but “in the ways in which he can embody this word, bring it to life, and give it shape, structure, and vitality.” (*ibid.*, p. 115)

<sup>19</sup> Many philosophers argue that literary fiction has special cognitive gains based on the poetic devices characteristic (but not essential) for literary works, such as the metaphor. I shall, however, here ignore the treatment of poetic devices and leave it for those more acquainted with them.

<sup>20</sup> By the “autonomy” of literary characters, I simply mean that (great) characters are complex, dynamic and indeterminate and (in realist literature) aimed to create an illusion of a flesh-and-blood person. For a paradigmatic view of ‘autonomous’ characters who seem to live their own life, see Mikhail Bakhtin’s classic study *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*. In the work, Bakhtin famously argues that “Dostoyevsky [...] creates

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not voiceless slaves [...] but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.” Further, he claims that “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels.” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 6; emphases removed)

<sup>21</sup> The authors themselves note this (see Lamarque & Olsen 1994, p. 406). See their paraphrases in *ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>22</sup> Here, see Lamarque’s (2008, p. 237) view of Nussbaum’s interpretation of Euripides’s *Hecuba*.

<sup>23</sup> Arguably there are also metaphorical assertions in literary fiction which function like those used in ordinary discourse.

<sup>24</sup> Borges 1964d, p. 44. “Menard (acaso sin quererlo) ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lecture: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas” (Borges 2000, p. 55). Some clarifications however: first, Borges is not naturally asserting the literal meaning of the sentence of the actual world. Second, there actually was a french writer called Pierre Ménard (b. 1743), but he did not, as far as is known, invent the literary technique Borges describes.

<sup>25</sup> For similar views of fictional characters as concepts (that are used to refer to people or their properties in the actual world), see Martin 1982, pp. 225, 227–229 & 233–234; Carroll 2007, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> “[...] l’enfer, c’est les autres” (Sartre 1947, p. 182).

<sup>27</sup> One should also note that in the last sentence of Borges’s “Pierre Menard,” the author of the concluding statement is the unnamed narrator of the story. Taking into account the fantastic events and the tone of the work, the assertions Borges conveys through the narrator’s assertions seem to be humorous. Here, the moderate propositional theory suggests that the concluding statement should not be taken literally but as an exaggerated version of the author’s view, and to assert that the historical background of a literary work affects on the meaning of the work. Moreover, sometimes it is also difficult to locate the locus of an assertion or a thought expressed in a literary fiction. For instance, free indirect speech is often ambiguous as to whether it conveys the narrator’s views or thoughts of the character depicted. In such cases, the most plausible way to gain the author’s truth-claims, if any, is to rely on information gathered from the work and public information about the author.

<sup>28</sup> One should remark that the point of view of a literature assertion is here taken into account by including the speaker as a part of the definition, were the author directly using the speaker as her mouthpiece or as a part of her overall assertion act. Moreover, one should note that in this paper I have been speaking of literary assertions, not giving a theory of literary interpretation. For instance, the intrinsic and extrinsic viewpoints are not characteristics for literary assertions only but to fictional discourse in general. From the intrinsic point of view, Alyosha Karamazov is a “flesh-and-blood” person, whereas from the extrinsic point of view he is a fictional character created by Dostoyevsky.

<sup>29</sup> Naturally, background information about the author and the reader’s interpretative frame also affect on constructing the author’s truth-claims. For instance, it has been suggested that none of the voices in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* represent Kierkegaard’s actual opinions (see e.g. Westphal 2002, p. 23). Rather, Kierkegaard is seen to convey his philosophical claims by the complete work – were it the general existentialist interpretation that the reader should choose either the aesthetic or the ethical way of living depicted in the work, or the interpretation, generally inspired by the work’s sequel *Stages on Life’s Way*, that the views depicted in the work are stages of life (leading to the religious stage), or even the interpretation which maintains that the work advances Kantian ethics.

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