

The Cognitive Value of Modernist Literature: Ricœur's Conception of Productive Imagination Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT. When debating the cognitive value of the novel, philosophers often focus on the resemblance between real and fictional world. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that modernist literature, such as Franz Kafka's novels, are rarely used as examples to support claims about the novel's cognitive value. In my paper, I therefore offer a starting point for the development of a theory on the novel's cognitive value that also works for modernist literature by building on Paul Ricœur's conception of productive imagination. Starting from a case study of a short story of Kafka, I develop an account of the novel's cognitive value that is based on the tension between the literary work's invitation to interpretation and its simultaneous resistance against interpretation.

KEYWORDS. Ricœur; Literature; Modernism; Imagination; Kafka.

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In philosophical debates on literature, one of the most divisive topics is a literary work's cognitive value. Many philosophical theories on the cognitive value of literary works and its relation to literary appreciation have already been put forward and subjected to criticism. In this paper, I focus on one particular problem that relates to many of the existing theories, namely the fact that almost all of them use realist literature as their model.¹ This may mean that such theories are unable to attribute cognitive value to other kinds of literary works. For instance, it has often been argued that literary works offer us a distinctive kind of knowledge, such as knowledge about what it is like to be in a certain situation² or what the world looks like when seen from a certain point of view.³ It may indeed be true that reading novels *can* help us acquire knowledge about what it is like to lose a child, or to be a refugee, or to see the world very differently, but it is difficult to argue that we have acquired relevant knowledge by reading, in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, about what it is like to wake up in the morning having been transformed into a monstrous verminous bug. It is hardly surprising, then, that modernist works, such as Kafka's novels, are rarely used to support claims about the novel's cognitive value.⁴ By providing readers with an experience of alienation, and by frustrating their attempts to interpret the work, modernist novels do indeed challenge the view that literary works offer us information or

1 This is explicitly acknowledged by many philosophers who work on the cognitive value of literature. In his chapter on literary cognitivism in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of literature*, James Harold for instance points out that «We should note literary cognitivism is not normally understood as a claim about all of literature, but about fictional narrative works, particularly ones that are 'realistic'» (HAROLD 2016, 383). Similarly, Jukka Mikkonen notes in a recent paper that «when studying literature's ability to enlarge our understanding, the focus has traditionally been on the works' mimetic dimension: literary works are taken to offer us knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation or to see the world from a certain point (or points) of view, for instance. [...] Moreover, analytic philosophy of art [...] has investigated the cognitive gains of art typically in terms of, or derived from, truth and resemblance, favouring examples drawn from realist literature» (MIKKONEN 2018).

2 WALSH 1969.

3 PUTNAM 1978, 89.

4 Some of the few exceptions are HUEMER 2007 and MIKKONEN 2018.

unfamiliar perspectives on the world *as it is*.

In this paper, I examine a possible means of describing the cognitive value of the novel, and in particular the modernist novel, taking Paul Ricœur's theory of "productive imagination" as my point of departure. I aim to show that Ricœur's theory offers a promising alternative to existing theories on the novel's cognitive value, since it focuses not only on how literature imitates or reproduces reality, but also on how the literary work creates something new, and thus transforms reality rather than copying it. Ricœur's theory nevertheless faces important challenges when it comes to modernist literature.⁵ Although Ricœur clearly appreciates certain novels that are generally conceived as "modernist", such as Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, he also implicitly criticizes some important modernist works by stating that they tend to cultivate language for its own sake and no longer aim to put experiences into words.⁶ According to Ricœur, this tendency results in literary works that are «so far from the reach of the reader, [...] [that] the reader is left desperate on the shore».⁷ An investigation of Ricœur's theory of productive imagination will provide us with a useful starting point for exploring the cognitive value of modernist and other literature, as well as revealing the limits of Ricœur's approach.

5 When using the term "modernist literature", I refer to literary works that are characterized by self-reflexivity, a characteristic that is common to many canonical literary works from the first half of the twentieth century, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* or Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. This self-reflexivity manifests itself primarily in the many literary experiments used by modernist writers and the way literary conventions are questioned in their writings. This results, among other, in fragmentary writing, unconventional narrative points of view, or the use of different styles of writing within one work.

6 In *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)*, Ricœur also explicitly criticizes one particular modernist novel, namely James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Ricœur for instance states that *Ulysses* contains too many lacunae and indeterminacies, making it impossible for the reader to assemble the given narrative elements and experience it as a meaningful whole (RICŒUR 1983, 146).

7 FRIED 1991, 450.

1. Ricœur's Theory of Productive Imagination

In order to clarify what Ricœur means by productive imagination, I will use his essay «The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality»⁸ as a starting point. In this essay, Ricœur states that the traditional understanding of fiction fails to explain the crucial difference between a fiction and a replica of something real. This difference is manifest in the distinctive ways in which replicas and fictions refer to reality.⁹ However, in the traditional understanding of fiction – an understanding that is found in the philosophical works of Aristotle and Hume, but also Sartre – fiction is a replica of a special kind. According to this view, the workings of the imagination must be understood as the rendering present of something which is not immediately given. Yet, the image we have in our mind can be traced back to a previous perceptual experience. For example, the image of a friend that we 'see' in our mind when this friend is not present is derived from our previous perceptions of this friend. In this way, Ricœur states, the image raises no specific question of reference, «since it is the same thing, by hypothesis, that is to be perceived in *praesentia* or imagined in *absentia*. Image and perception differ only as regards their *modes of givenness*».¹⁰ In the traditional theory of fiction, fictional entities are then understood as new combinations of simple images that are derived from previous experience. The classical examples of the centaur and the chimera illustrate this: these entities are traditionally understood as new combinations of old components. According to Ricœur, however, the traditional understanding of fiction wholly overlooks the shift in referential status that accompanies the transition from the image as replica to the image as fiction. While the replica has the same referent as the corresponding perception, namely

8 RICŒUR 1991.

9 RICŒUR 1991, 117.

10 RICŒUR 1991, 118.

the existing thing, and differs only from this perception in its mode of givenness, the fictional image lacks an original to which it could refer. Because of this lack of a referent in the real world, fiction therefore creates a new referent. Instead of working to reproduce, as it does when we imagine something we have previously perceived, in fiction the imagination works to produce. This does not mean that fiction does not refer to reality, for Ricœur. Rather, fiction refers to reality in a *productive* manner. The implications of this become clear when we examine Ricœur's use of the metaphor as a model for understanding the workings of the productive imagination.

2. The Metaphor as a Model for the Productive Imagination

One of the reasons why Ricœur uses the metaphor to explain the productive aspect of fiction is his desire to counteract the dominance of perception in the traditional approach to imagination. Such a shift away from the framework of perception is necessary because this framework assumes that all images are derived from perception and thus prevents recognition of the productive reference in fiction. Therefore, a theory of fiction «must first break with this way of putting the problem and cease asking to what extent an image differs from perception».¹¹ According to Ricœur, the first step therefore consists in shifting from the sphere of perception to the sphere of language. In making this shift, it becomes apparent that the productive aspects of imagination are linked to certain productive aspects of language. A prime example of the productive aspects of language is the metaphor, in Ricœur's opinion, because it demonstrates how the emergence of new meanings in the sphere of language leads to the emergence of new images.

For Ricœur, a metaphor is not merely imagery, but it is attributed an important cognitive value. This can be understood by exploring the

¹¹ RICŒUR 1991, 121.

operation of a metaphor. The bringing together of elements from different semantic fields in one metaphorical utterance results in a tension between the two terms. However, the main tension created by the metaphor is not that between the two terms, but the tension between the two opposing *interpretations* of the utterance – literal and metaphorical. If we attempt to interpret a metaphor literally, the result is absurd. Through this absurdity, the literal reading of a metaphor gives rise to a metaphorical reading which invites us to see a similarity in spite of the difference.¹² The metaphorical reading does not erase the difference, but the previous incompatibility can now be perceived through the new compatibility.¹³ The operation of the metaphor therefore consists of a two-part movement. The first part is negative: a literal interpretation of the metaphor results in absurdity, which creates a neutralizing effect, because the direct reference to reality is suspended. This first movement thus functions as an *epoche* of the real: we know that the metaphor does not describe a real state of affairs. However, the neutralizing effect enables the second movement, which introduces the metaphor's cognitive value. In the *epoche* of the real, the emergence of new meanings becomes possible. The metaphor therefore creates a new meaning and makes it possible to express something which could not have been expressed in any other way. According to Ricœur, metaphorical language therefore also refers to reality, but does this in a new, indirect manner by suspending the direct reference. The metaphor enables us to speak of those aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be said in any direct way. Metaphorical language suggests and reveals «the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who *dwell* in it for a while».¹⁴ Furthermore, the suspension of the reference proper to ordinary descriptive language is «the negative condition for the emergence of a more radical way of looking at things».¹⁵ Metaphorical language thus makes it possible to «dismantle

12 RICŒUR 1976, 50.

13 RICŒUR 1991, 125.

14 RICŒUR 1978, 153.

15 RICŒUR 1978, 154.

the reign of objects» and enables us to express «our primordial belonging to a world which we inhabit, that is to say, which at once precedes us and receives the imprint of our works». ¹⁶ In this way, the metaphor offers us new ways of looking at things, of perceiving the world, and thus of describing the world.

3. From Metaphor to Fiction

This analysis of the metaphor makes it clear how the metaphor can be used as a model for understanding what fiction, and especially literary fiction, actually is. The two-part movement mentioned in the analysis of the metaphor can, according to Ricœur, also be found in fiction. In literary fiction, the negative movement is clear: a work of literary fiction does not refer directly to reality; it is not meant as a report of facts. If we read in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, for instance, that «someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested», we know that this Josef K. does not exist in the real world and that the story we are reading is, indeed, fictional. In this way, works of literary fiction also involve an *epoche* of the real by suspending any direct reference to the real world.

At the same time, we might argue that works of fiction do refer to the real world, but in a “metaphorical” way. This means that fiction refers to certain experiences and aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be expressed directly. According to Ricœur, the referent of narrative discourse is the order of human action. ¹⁷ Just as metaphors

16 RICŒUR 2003 [1975], 362.

17 This is also clear from Ricœur's use of the notion of "refiguration" in his description of the act of reading in *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)*. In this book, Ricœur develops the idea that fictional narratives are characterized by a threefold mimesis. The first stage of this mimesis, which Ricœur describes as "prefiguration", consists of a pre-understanding of both our world of action and literary conventions. Writer and reader share this pre-understanding, to a large extent, which means that the reader is able to understand the motives, emotions, actions and so on of the fictional characters in a work. In the second stage of the mimesis, which is described by Ricœur as "configuration", the writer

offer us new means of describing the world, works of literary fiction offer us a «positive insight into the potentialities of our being in the world which our everyday transactions with manipulatable objects tend to conceal».¹⁸ By bracketing the world as it is, literary works offer us new possible ways of inhabiting the world and provide models for reading reality in a new way.

At this point, however, it should be noted that using the metaphor as a model for understanding fiction has its limits. In stating that works of literary fiction refer to reality in a metaphorical way and that the referent of narrative discourse is obvious, namely the order of human action, Ricœur seems to neglect the possibility that a work's referent or meaning might be not completely clear. Franz Kafka's short story *Before the Law* may serve as an example of a work whose meaning or referent remains undetermined. In this intriguing story, a gatekeeper sits before the law. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry to the law, but the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at that time. The man decides to wait until entry can be granted. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down to one side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The man grows old and just before his death, he gathers all of his experiences of his time at the gate into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper: «Everyone strives to reach the law», says the man, «so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance? ». The gatekeeper sees that the man is dying and says, «No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it».¹⁹

transforms these heterogeneous elements into a coherent story. In the third and final stage, described as "refiguration", the reader "applies" the story to his or her world of action. In this way, Ricœur suggests that the act of reading can be understood as a recovery of those aspects of our world of action that are configured in the literary work.

18 RICŒUR 1978, 155.

19 The two quotations from the original story are cited from the translation by Wilma and Edwin Muir in: KAFKA 1971 [1916].

Kafka's story is a puzzling one: it gives its reader the impression that something profound has been said, though the reader may struggle to decipher its exact meaning. What does "the law" represent?²⁰ Why does the man continue to wait and why does he want to visit the law in the first place? Why does this law have a personal entrance, given that 'the law' is generally conceived as something which is universally applicable? We might also wonder whether the context in which this story appears determines its meaning. This story was not only published as a self-contained story, but also appears in the novel *The Trial*, raising questions about the extent to which the broader narrative of *The Trial* should be taken into account when interpreting *Before the Law*.

Many interpreters have stressed the fact that this story, and indeed Kafka's work in general, is characterized by a fundamental "undecidability", in that it invites the reader to interpret the story while also making it impossible to arrive at such an interpretation. Theodor W. Adorno, for instance, has described Kafka's prose as «a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen. [...] Each sentence says 'interpret me', and none will permit it».²¹ Similarly, Arthur Cools states that the enigmatic, fragmentary, and disorientating nature of Kafka's work invites an infinite hermeneutics.²²

Many authors have pointed out that a parallel can be drawn between the country man in *Before the Law* and the reader attempting to gain access to the text. Vivian Liska, for instance, writes that «in Kafka's parable, the law remains not only unreachable for the man from the country but also eludes readers' attempts to pin down its meaning and

20 As Vivian Liska writes in *'Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper comes a man...': Kafka, Narrative, and the Law*, it remains uncertain, despite innumerable interpretations of Kafka's law-related texts, «whether the law in his work is to be understood in primarily juridical, social, and political or in metaphysical, theological, and religious terms. This uncertainty has elicited numerous, sometimes contradictory interpretations and has inspired often opposing notions of justice and the dichotomy between narrative and the law» (LISKA 2013, 177).

21 ADORNO 1983 [1955], 246.

22 COOLS 2016, 134.

effects».²³ In the same vein, Eli Schonfeld writes that «from the start, this text, though soliciting interpretation, in fact defies interpretation. [...] Before this text, as before the law, we find ourselves equally exposed, equally empty, without resources. Before this text, we find ourselves, exactly like the story's protagonist, the countryman, the *Mann vom Lande*: ignorant. Yet we do not know exactly what, or why. We are ignorant, from the beginning to the end».²⁴ The parallel between the law and the impenetrable story itself was probably developed most extensively by Jacques Derrida, who argued that *Before the Law* is in some way the story of the story's inaccessibility and that it describes nothing but itself. Like the law, the text guards itself, maintains itself, and thus becomes unreadable, because it is impossible to gain access to its proper significance.²⁵ According to Derrida, *Before the Law* tells us something about the being-before-the-law of any text and is an example of the fact that «reading a text might indeed reveal that it is untouchable, literally intangible, *precisely because it is readable*, and for the same reason unreadable to the extent to which the presence within it of a clear and graspable sense remains as hidden as its origin».²⁶

4. Haunting Fiction

As Derrida shows, Kafka's story is no isolated case, but instead an excellent example of the workings of literary fiction: it invites the reader to interpret it, but also resists interpretation. While this mechanism is at work in every literary work of fiction, we might say that modernist writers have made it more visible by challenging – in multiple ways – the reader's ability to interpret their work. Indeed, where should a reader begin when interpreting a novel when he or she cannot simply rely on previous reading experiences, because the

23 LISKA 2013, 177.

24 SCHONFELD 2016, 108.

25 DERRIDA 1992, 196, 210-1.

26 DERRIDA 1992, 197 (emphasis in original).

majority of narrative conventions are abandoned?

Instead of considering the impossibility of interpretation a problem, I believe modernist literature shows the real power of literary fiction, namely its ability to be “haunting”. By this I mean that a modernist story invites its reader to arrive at an interpretation, though no “true” interpretation exists, and it thus continues to haunt the reader, inviting us to keep thinking. This is the case because literary texts are “authored”, which means that we, as readers, presuppose that the words we are reading are the result of an intentional process.²⁷ The act of interpretation thus can be understood as an attempt to reconstruct these intentions. This, however, does not mean that the reader must try to discover the “true” intentions of the author, as was the aim of, for instance, Romantic hermeneutics, but rather that readers must assume that the work they read is the result of certain artistic choices and intentions. What we try to uncover, are the intentions of, what Ricœur, following Wayne Booth, calls the “implied” author: the “author” the reader constructs in his reading by focusing on the rhetoric strategies and techniques that are used in the work.²⁸ However, as the example of *Before the Law* made clear, it is possible to construct multiple “authors” or possible intentions when reading or interpreting a text. But because these constructions remain *constructions*, a final interpretation remains out of reach.

Starting from this idea, we could develop Ricœur’s theory of productive imagination into a useful framework for discussing the workings of modernist literary fiction and literary fiction in general. Just as in Ricœur’s model, we can argue that direct reference to the real world is suspended in a work of literary fiction: we know that the story we are reading is fictional, made up by its author, and not a

27 Derrek Attridge describes the notion of “authoredness” by making a distinction between a “writing” and a mere “text”: «[M]ost of what I read, I read as writing, which is to say as words which have in some sense been chosen and arranged. [...] By contrast, ‘text’ (as Roland Barthes liked to remind his readers) suggests an unauthored weave of linguistic signs, and seems more appropriate for the vast quantity of uncreative writing» (ATTRIDGE 2004, 103).

28 RICŒUR 1985, 289-90.

report of true events. Subsequently, the fact that the reader knows that the story is made up, that certain artistic choices have been made, and that it has been composed by someone in a certain way, immediately leads us to ask what this story *means*. Unlike Ricœur, however, I believe that our engagement with fictional stories demonstrates that this meaning remains undiscoverable, and that we cannot read a story as something which refers to reality metaphorically, since its referent may remain unclear. Kafka's work is a prime example of the fact that, as the French writer and critic Maurice Blanchot pointed out in one of his essays on Kafka, novels send us endlessly back to a truth outside of literature, while we begin to betray that truth as soon as it draws us away from literature.²⁹ In this way, every interpretation seems to be a failed attempt to grasp the story's meaning. Nevertheless, I believe it is important that continuous efforts are made to arrive at interpretations, since every interpretation creates new meaning.

The workings of literary fiction have something in common with how "thinking" is defined by Hannah Arendt. In Arendt's account, thinking is understood not as something which results in the achievement of truth, but as an ongoing process with no established results. Rather than offering us knowledge, thinking creates meaning,³⁰ accommodating the need to transform our environment into a *world* and to experience the lives we live as meaningful. Works of literary fiction can thus be understood as invitations to the reader to think and to create meaning. Returning to Kafka's story, we might argue that in Derrida's reading of *Before the Law*, the story offers us a new, meaningful way to understand the workings of literary fiction. In this way, the story offers us new images and meanings and broadens our understanding and perspective. Other readings or interpretations might offer us other ways in which the story can create new meanings and broaden our understanding in different ways. Thus, fictional stories become an inexhaustible source of new meanings.

29 BLANCHOT 1981, 63.

30 ARENDT 1978.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I suggested that, while almost all theorists on the novel's cognitive value have neglected modernist literature, this kind of literature may well offer a useful starting point for exploring this genre's cognitive value in more depth. In order to develop such an exploration, I started from Paul Ricœur's theory of productive imagination, understanding the novel as a text in which direct reference to reality is suspended and the question of what the story *means* is subsequently raised. As the case of modernist literature shows, this question cannot be answered by attempting to uncover the true meaning of a story; instead, we must consider interpretation as the creation of new meaning. In this way, it appears more useful to understand the cognitive value of literature in terms of its ability to create meaning, than to explain it in terms of discoverable truth or obtainable knowledge, as is traditionally the case in philosophical accounts of literature's cognitive value.

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