

Problems in Philosophy of Literature

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Abstract

This article discusses methodological inconsistencies affecting philosophy of literature today, especially in its analytical and perspectivist instantiations. In doing so, it raises questions on method that apply to the humanities in general. As a result of the inquiry, an invitation to return to ontology-metaphysics is formulated: too often, isolating specificities from their contexts can lead to arbitrary definitions and incomplete analyses. It might be necessary to adopt a wider outlook—one which seeks the foundations of knowledge and to explain a specific object in relation to its widest possible context—to explain many of the literary objects we want to understand.

Keywords: Carola Barbero; essentialism; institutionalism; Peter Lamarque; textualism



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Introduction

Around 375 BCE, Plato investigated the role of literature in the *Republic* (1997), focusing on the realisation of the ideal state and accusing poets of mystification and moral corruption. About 40 years later, Aristotle took the opposite approach in the *Poetics* (1932), now considered to be the first philosophical treatise dedicated to literary analysis ever. Aristotle's work presents a theoretical investigation of tragedy and epic. It defines the concepts of mimesis and catharsis, which remain fundamental for literary theory to this day.

The opposition between Plato and Aristotle has defined the history of literary theory. The world had to wait until 13 BCE to see another work comparable to the *Poetics* for its focus on the art of poetry itself: Horace's *Ars Poetica* (1989). In the Common Era and up to modernity, philosophy has remained divided between followers of Plato—who see literature as a means to other ends and thus as secondary to more relevant political and moral questions—and of Aristotle—who try to go beyond circumscribed definitions of specific characteristics, causes, effects, and genres to formulate a theoretical understanding of the nature of literature as a practice in itself.¹

What we call “philosophy of literature” today inherits Aristotle's goal (despite remaining strongly influenced by Plato) and finds its modern forerunners in the likes of Hume, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche. In “Of Tragedy” ([1757] 2008b) and “Of the Standard of Taste” ([1757] 2008a), Hume tried to theorise an objectivity of literary criticism which would also recognise its subjectivist foundation. In *The World as Will and Representation* ([1818] 2010), Schopenhauer described tragedy as the place where “what emerges horribly is the conflict of the will with itself” (280). In *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* ([1835] 1975), Hegel defined poetry as the universal art of free thought, independent of sensory representation. And in *The Birth of Tragedy* ([1872] 1999), Nietzsche characterised tragedy as the perfect balance between the rational and irrational, the Apollonian and Dionysian.

These are just some examples to show that philosophers have always tried to understand why literature is read and written as well as how it could be defined. As a field of enquiry, today's philosophy of literature inherits this interest to analyse and understand the concept of literature in its fullness and complexity: philosophy of literature wants to explain what literature is.

What is Analytical Philosophy of Literature?

As a contemporary discipline, philosophy of literature is a field of study that seeks to conceptualise a reliable, coherent, comprehensive, and defensible definition of literature. Within this domain, analytical philosophy of literature indicates that subset of works which try to achieve the same goal by applying the analytical method. Works

1 For an extended analysis of Plato and Aristotle as theorists of literary truth, see Pitari (2021).

in this field distinguish themselves from past philosophical treatises precisely in their awareness of being constitutive parts of a larger scientific field (in the humanistic sense of “scientific”). Thus, for example, a work like Jean-Paul Sartre’s “What Is Literature?” ([1947] 1988) differs essentially from contemporary works in analytical philosophy of literature despite its sharing the same aim. This is because Sartre sought to define literature according to his own ontology, which he thought presented the correct description of reality, and this approach would not be admitted in contemporary analytical practice.² In analytical philosophy of literature, scholars have adopted the specialised approach of trying to contribute to communal knowledge through the analytic method, as described and considered below. For this reason, they study past works like Sartre’s as useful early attempts to tackle the subject which might inspire future insight, but they hesitate to admit them within the realm of scientific research that can disclose the true definition of literature.

This is the picture that Peter Lamarque paints in *The Philosophy of Literature* (2009), which is adopted in this analysis as the most authoritative condensation of the nature and progress of analytical philosophy of literature available today. In fact, Lamarque writes that philosophy of literature—the whole field, not the analytical subset—seeks “to analyze the logical foundations of the ‘practice’ of literature” and that its “principal method [is] ‘analytical,’ broadly conceived” (2009, 8). The analysis to follow will not grant the universality of this definition, but that Lamarque feels comfortable attributing the analytical character to the entire field shows, in itself, how widespread the analytical approach is, and therefore how fruitful an insightful criticism of it can be.³

Analytical philosophy of literature is based on three principles that can be summarised as follows:

1. *Philosophy of literature investigates the fundamental principles of the concept “literature” to find its essence.* This entails asking questions like “what does it mean to understand literature as art?” and “what can be called literary?”
2. *Philosophy of literature intends to fill a gap in the history of philosophy.* Lamarque writes that “in spite of this model set by Aristotle, there has been little systematic interest in literature by philosophers” (2009, 12).
3. *Philosophy of literature intends to work through the “quintessential philosophical methodology”* (2009, 1); that is, through the analytical method, to acquire systematic understanding of the essence of the concept “literature.”

2 For an extended analysis of Sartre’s conception of literature (in relation to David Foster Wallace’s), see Pitari (2020).

3 Lamarque’s view does not exhaust the variety of perspectives in the field—for example, much of literary theory today is inspired by neo-cognitivism, which is not addressed in this article—and yet it represents some ideas that are widely shared and are therefore worth considering/criticising.

What is the Analytical Method?

Lamarque separates the work of contemporary philosophers of literature from the work of past thinkers like Sartre and Aristotle on the basis of the former's new systematic use of the analytical method in their inquiries into literature. But what does "analytical" mean, and how does the analytical method differ from that of traditional philosophers?

Analytic: adj. [from Latin *analyticus*, Greek ἀναλυσις] (pl. m. *-There*). – "1. pertaining to or proceeding by analysis (opposed to synthetic)." (Stevenson 2010)

Analysis: noun. "1. the separating of any material or abstract entity into its constituent elements (opposed to synthesis). 2. this process as a method of studying the nature of something or of determining its essential features and their relations. 4. a philosophical method of exhibiting complex concepts or propositions as compounds or functions of more basic ones" (*OED*). The process of breaking up a concept, proposition, linguistic complex, or fact into its simple or ultimate constituents. (Audi 1995, 25)

Based on the above definitions, the analytic method proceeds by separating material into its constituent elements, studying the nature of something by determining its essential features and their relations, and exhibiting complex concepts or propositions as compounds or functions of more basic ones. This definition tells us something fundamental about the intent at the heart of analytical philosophy of literature: it seeks to understand literature by separating it from its surroundings. The idea is that the essence of the concept can only come to light by clearing out all the non-essential. From this point of view, the criticism of past philosophers is justified, as their definitions of literature were dependent on their ontologies.

But the idea that the meaning of any specific concept can be grasped analytically raises a series of questions. Traditional philosophers tried to define literature on the basis of their metaphysical inquiry because they thought of meanings as subject to the principle of indexicality—a principle which ultimately leads to the necessity of understanding the whole of Being. For example, you cannot understand what literature is independently from the rest of the world just as you cannot understand what a human hand is if you do not understand what a human being is, and you cannot understand what a human being is if you do not know anything about its place in the cosmos.

Of course, from the opposite point of view, the worry is that, if we need to understand everything before we understand anything, then we will never understand anything. And if that were the case, then this article could be understood only by someone who already knew everything.

And this leads us to the ultimate question of epistemology: what is the nature of knowledge? This article will not try to answer this question, and therefore it will not be able to provide a complete theory of literature. The aim in what follows is to raise some points as to why we might not want, as a community, to continue taking for granted that

the analytic method is the preferable option in all fields of inquiry. And if the article can raise these doubts successfully, then this will constitute its contribution to the field.

The Principle of Indexicality

The principle of indexicality indicates that all meaning is deictic: that is, that the meaning of every word and every thing depends on its context, and the context on its context. A literary example of this would be that the meaning of a book depends, among other things, on the historical context in which it comes to light. Now, most people would be willing to concede that they agree with this principle, given the specific example. And yet any application of the analytic method violates this principle by imposing an arbitrary delimitation to the context.

Again, epistemologically, the worry expressed by an analytic philosopher would be that without imposing this arbitrary delimitation our attempts to know anything would be subject to an infinite regress: that is, we would end up trying to know the context of the context of the context ... But this observation leads to at least two answers: (1) we might have to face the fact that we cannot know anything—that not imposing arbitrary limits might be inconvenient does not rationally justify imposing them; and (2) there will be no infinite regress if it is possible to know the ultimate context.

This leads us to the ultimate question of metaphysics: is there an absolute truth, and if so, can we know it? But whether we can or cannot, the problem remains that imposing delimitations to analytically define fields of specialisation might ultimately be an entirely arbitrary process that cannot be justified (and therefore cannot make claims to truth). Undoubtedly, this will appear like a controversial claim, but it refers to the great works of the neo-positivists, who started with a shared desire to construct the complete theoretical explanation of how the analytic method could describe the truth but concluded—despite their initial hopes—that this was impossible. Some of the works I am referring to are Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ([1921] 2002), Carnap's *The Logical Structure of the World* ([1928] 2003), and Neurath's essays on physicalism and protocol sentences,⁴ culminating in Schlick's ([1934] 1959) strong affirmation that talking about truth without incontrovertible foundations makes our scientific knowledge equivalent to a belief in any fictional story.

The limitation in the analytic method rests in its hope that the meaning of a concept could be grasped by arbitrarily separating that concept from the world. On the contrary, Sartre's "What Is Literature?", for example, does not suffer from this limitation (although it may suffer from others). Sartre tried to deduce the meaning of literature from his understanding of reality. He thought that he could understand literature only by first grasping a correct understanding of reality and then coherently developing that

4 In "Empirical Sociology" (1931)—reprinted in Neurath (1973)—and "Physicalism" (1931) and "Protocol Statements" (1932)—both reprinted in Neurath (1983).

understanding towards a definition of literature. Accordingly, whether “What is Literature?” presents a correct theory of literature ultimately depends on whether *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 2015) presents a correct ontology.

Sartre’s approach characterises all traditional philosophy. Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* ([1970] 2009) is another example. In Barthes’s view, Balzac’s *Sarrasine* ([1830] 2001) demonstrates that the meaning of a literary text does not derive from the author but is created by the reader. Like Sartre, Barthes was trying to define literature in accordance with his general theory of semiotics. Both Barthes and Sartre thought that one could not define literature (or indeed any other concept) without doing ontology first and engaging in deductive reasoning starting from premises that refer to the fundamental laws of Being. Analytical philosophy defines itself in opposition to this tradition, but in doing so it loses something of fundamental importance.

The Metaphysical Method

If the principle of indexicality is true, then the very idea of specialised knowledge—dependent as it is on perspectivism—is contradictory. To commit to specialisation is to isolate concepts from their contexts in the belief that understanding will come through isolation. Specialisation treats the context as nothing. It needs contexts to be irrelevant. Otherwise understanding through isolation would be impossible.

For analytical philosophy of literature this means, for example, that the study of literature should omit investigations on the meaning of concepts such as “human being” and “consciousness,” which fall within the domain of other specialisations. But for traditional philosophers like Sartre or Barthes, it is absurd to ask what literature is without first trying to define what human beings and language are.

Of course, one cannot, in any single work, explain everything. But when a philosopher of literature accepts some metaphysical presuppositions upon which to delimit their context of their inquiry, they should make those presuppositions explicit and possibly offer an introductory explanation of why they have chosen to begin from those presuppositions. Undesirable outcomes occur when such presuppositions are left implicit, or when there is a lacking of metaphysical understanding regarding the necessary presence of said presuppositions; that is, when a philosopher of literature appears to assume that they can simply proceed with their analytical inquiry because the meaning of the fundamental terms that constitute the context of that inquiry (the meaning of terms like “human being,” “truth,” and “subjectivity”) is set in stone and can be taken for granted.

If there is any hope of understanding what literature means, this can only be based on successful metaphysical-ontological inquiry. This does not mean that there is no place for the analytical study of the nature of literature, but it does mean that the analytical method can define the actual nature of literature only if it departs from true

metaphysical-ontological premises, whether those have been set by the philosophers of literature themselves beforehand or by someone else.

This applies to all analytical fields and in itself does not constitute a problem. The problem arises when theorists become too busy trying to figure out their way through their analytical thinking and forget that their analytical thinking occurs within a metaphysical context. As a result, they declare metaphysics irrelevant, a thing of the past, something overcome by the analytical method. And this is where their approach fails because analysis without metaphysical foundations remains arbitrary: an argument incapable of supporting its claims.

Essentialism

As we have seen, according to Lamarque “philosophy of literature investigates the fundamental principles of the concept ‘literature’ to find its essence,” and it does so by using the analytical method. But what is the “essence” of something?

Essence [from Latin *essentia*, Greek οὐσία]. 1. the basic, real, and invariable nature of a thing or its significant individual feature or features; 5. Philosophy. the inward nature, true substance, or constitution of anything, as opposed to what is accidental, phenomenal, illusory, etc; 6. something that exists, especially a spiritual or immaterial entity. (Stevenson 2010)

Thus, to find the essence of literature is to find literature’s fundamental and invariable nature, its substance, its necessary constitution (as opposed to its contingent qualities). Lamarque’s language, then, helps us indicate the problem we are trying to highlight. How can the analytical method find the invariable nature of a thing, rather than its contingent qualities, especially if it defines itself against metaphysics?

Metaphysics n. f. [from lat. Medieval *metaphysics*, itself from Gr. μετὰ τὰ φυσικά]. The philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality. It is broader in scope than science [...]. It is also more fundamental, since it investigates questions science does not address but the answers to which it presupposes. The view, sometimes considered scientific (but an assumption rather than an argued theory), that all that there is, is spatiotemporal (a part of “nature”) and is knowable only through the methods of the sciences, is itself a metaphysics, namely *metaphysical naturalism* (not to be confused with natural philosophy). [...]. Metaphysics can also be understood in a more definite sense, suggested by Aristotle’s notion ... of “first philosophy,” namely, the study of being *qua* being, i.e., of the most general and necessary characteristics that anything must have in order to count as a being, an entity (*ens*). (Audi 1995, 564–65)

Metaphysics is where “we may also ask whether any entity has *essential properties*” (Audi 1995, 565; emphasis added) and what these might be. And “essentialism” is that specific metaphysics that defends the idea that there are such things as essences: “essentialism, a metaphysical theory that objects have essences and that there is a distinction between essential and non-essential or accidental predications” (Audi 1995,

281). Only by considering reality in its universal characteristics, seeking absolute knowledge, can we hope to grasp the essence, that is, the eternal quality, of something. This is not merely a methodological question but a fundamental logical principle: for there to be knowledge of essences, there must be absolute truth and knowledge of absolute truth. Metaphysics is therefore necessary to achieve the project of philosophy of literature as Lamarque envisions it. Thus, when Lamarque (with Olsen) states that “metaphysical worries about the nature of objects, reality, the world, truth, and so forth [...] can be dispelled—often shown to be irrelevant—in the context of literary criticism or theory” (Lamarque and Olsen 2002, 14–15), he has lost sight of the fundamental preconditions of his own argument.⁵

Institutionalism

Carola Barbero writes that the field aims to

examine the different definitions of “literature” proposed throughout history to try to understand if there are any (essential) properties that make any work a literary work. If no such properties can be found, we must consider the possibility that something else might determine what “literature” is. Perhaps, the institutional or social context on which the works inevitably depend. (Barbero 2013, 10; my translation)

Barbero invites the field to explore institutionalism if no essential properties of literature can be found, but if the field forgets its necessary metaphysical foundations—as we have seen above with the example of Lamarque—then it is inevitable that such properties will never be found. That is, in this case, if philosophy of literature does not find the essence of literature, that is because of its faulty method; it does not show that there is no literary essence.

But contrary to what Barbero thinks, it might still be the case that the essence of literature can be found in institutionalism—in which case, the essence of literature would be external to it, in the context wherein it arises. That is, institutionalism as a form of metaphysical essentialism—not as a rejection of essentialism. This kind of institutionalism deserves to be seriously considered.⁶

This institutionalist view originates with the work of Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Danto argued in “The Artworld” (1964) that entities become art when communities include them in that social institution that is the artworld. Dickie followed—with *Art*

5 This article does not intend to criticise Lamarque’s work. It just takes some specific views expressed in his *The Philosophy of Literature*—views which are largely adopted by thinkers in the field and in the humanities in general—as worth criticising. Consider the above statement about treating metaphysical worries as irrelevant: Lamarque wrote an entire book about the metaphysics of art, entitled *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art* (2010). The point of the present criticism is not to claim that Lamarque ignored metaphysics throughout his career but to specify that metaphysics cannot be ignored.

6 For an insightful attempt at an essentialist theory of art see Jeffrey Strayer (2007).

and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis (1974)—by developing Danto’s framework into the first systematic institutionalist theory of art. According to their point of view, a literary work must conform to the conventions of the literary institution, to its modes of production, consumption, and evaluation, and so to its founding attitudes and expectations, to be accepted as art within its social context.

The problem is that, in today’s philosophy of literature (as described by Barbero), institutionalism is generally accepted as a theory consistent with the field’s rejection of metaphysics and adoption of a specialised, perspectivist framework. Thus, Barbero writes that “we must [...] begin to consider literary works as extremely rich and complex objects that no theory can ever claim to fully explain” (2013, 111; my translation). To her, this is a result of the impossibility of essentialism, and her work makes no reference to the fact that (a) anti-essentialism is itself a metaphysics and (b) institutionalism is a theory that seeks precisely to fully explain what literature is.

Her framework thus suffers from the same inconsistency that has haunted various forms of scepticism for millennia: the inconsistency of the claim that “the truth is that there is no truth.” Brought to its logical conclusions, this kind of approach to institutionalism leads to counterintuitive consequences which Barbero herself would almost certainly not be willing to accept.

First, the common belief that works of art can revolutionise the artworld becomes contradictory. If the institution is what grants artistic value to a work then any work that truly violates the attitudes and expectations of the artworld can never be accepted as art. Therefore, there cannot be any such thing as a revolutionary work of art.⁷ Obviously, this is not what Barbero or Danto would want. Danto took Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* to be revolutionary. Yet, logically, if the artistic status of an object is entirely decided by the institution of the artworld, then nothing can revolutionise the artworld except the artworld itself. That is, it is not the revolutionary work of the artist that changes the norms of the artworld but the artworld that decides to change its norms to accommodate new products.

Again, the point is not that institutionalism claims as much but that it should claim as much. If what is art depends on the institution’s choice, then the common sense notion that artists revolutionise the institution is erroneous, unless we shift the meaning of

7 One might counterargue that value is not necessarily at play in institutionalism as the artworld could only classify objects as art, rather than judge whether they are valuable or invaluable art. But this argument would be the result of linguistic confusion. To classify something as art *is* to bestow a judgment of value upon an object. To print a book, master an album, exhibit a picture is to say that this object is good enough to be considered art. A book can be “bad” only in relationship to a book that is better. But to be in the conversation both books need to be considered “art.” In other words, even the worst book in literary history has ultimately been judged by the literary institution to be “good” in comparison to 99% of written productions in human history (that is, all the material that never found a publisher), just like the worst NBA player is better at basketball than 99% of people in the world.

being revolutionary to being accepted by the institution while being different from previously accepted products.⁸

The idea that a piece of art can actively force the artworld to change its judgments entails the belief that there is an essential artistic feature internal to the object that compels the artworld to change its definition of art. It may well be that the institution itself is the essence of art and that the institution is what bestows artistic value upon objects, but if so, we just need to be willing to accept that the active part in revolutions is played by the institution itself, not by the admitted works, as common sense would have it. In short, the claim that Duchamp's *Fountain* broke conservative conventions and changed the artworld entails a belief in essentialism within artistic objects, while the coherent institutional conclusion would be that at a certain point, the artworld decided to change and accept the *Fountain* as art. The role of the object in this second case is passive and this leads to a second counterintuitive conclusion: because the institution bestows artfulness upon the object, the *Fountain* was not art before acceptance and became art after acceptance.

The definition of art thus comes to indicate a purely relative value judgment: nothing and everything is art depending on the judgment of a specific artworld at a specific point in space and time, and the reasons provided by the artworld to justify its choice to promote one work or negate artistic value to another can only be arbitrary because there are no essential qualities within the work that can be referred to to explain why that work constitutes art while another does not. Thus, when an artistic community explains why a specific work is a great work of art, said community is in fact creating post-facto explanations to justify its arbitrary taste. And this might very well be the case. But it just means, again, that institutionalism should accept that its premises lead to consequences that it is not generally willing to accept. That is, that what counts as art in any specific environment is the result of what Nietzsche called the will to power, or in other words, that institutionalism should recognise that Nietzsche developed its premises to their conclusions when he deduced from his philosophy that beauty and value mean nothing except what a human being—or community of human beings—wants them to mean at a specific time and place.

Consider this paradox: what grounds can institutionalism offer for the claim that Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* ([1851] 2003) was a great work of literature before its rediscovery in the 1920s? When published, the novel was a commercial disaster. It became accepted as art only with a posthumous edition. And while we commonly say that “the value of the book was simply recognised later,” this claim again entails that

8 Other problems arise from Dickie's “Introduction to Aesthetics” ([1984] 1997), where he writes that “an artwork is an artifact created to be presented to the artworld audience” (92). If this were true, it would mean that there can be no such thing as an artwork that was not meant to be presented to the artworld audience. What does this do to Anne Frank's *Diary* ([1942–1944] 2019), or to the letters of John Butler Yeats, or to any work produced for oneself with no intention to show it to anyone else, and which might then be discovered by others?

there is an essential artistic value inherent to the book and independent of the literary institution, which the institution failed to recognise at first.

Thus, this claim, like the claim that the *Fountain* actively revolutionised the world, if true, would disprove institutionalism. On the other hand, if institutionalism were true, we would have to say that—despite it remaining the exact same book—*Moby Dick* was a mediocre novel until the 1920s and became a great novel after the 1920s. Or we should say, with Nietzsche, that any such judgment is entirely arbitrary and ultimately nonsensical.

The institutional view has no grounds to differentiate a work's value from its reception. Thus, it can do nothing but register what happens in art history, just as Nietzsche, after destroying the essence of morality, realised that nothing but genealogy could be done. Institutionalism cannot say whether *Moby Dick* is art or not, it can only report that the artworld did not consider it art at one point and did at another.

Accordingly, Barbero's claim that, thanks to the institutionalist view, "the problem [in defining literature] then becomes that of establishing or even simply understanding what the conventions are at the basis of these institutions" (2013, 30; my translation) now appears as another example of the consequences of perhaps looking too narrowly (too analytically) at a specific object of study without realising the importance of the metaphysical context around it. Without metaphysical foundations, institutionalism cannot explain what art is. The lack of foundations leads to an infinite regress—art must be explained on its institutional context, the institution on its social context, the social context on a wider context, etc. *ad infinitum*—that can be stopped only by resting on an ultimate explanation somewhere. No matter which approach one takes, metaphysical inquiry always announces itself as necessary in the end.

In this sense, the most essential contradiction in contemporary philosophy of literature occurs in anti-essentialist approaches that follow Richard Rorty's work, like Garry Hagberg's "Self-Defining Reading: Literature and the Constitution of Personhood" (2010) and Joshua Landy's "Passion, Counter-Passion, Catharsis" (2010). In "Pragmatism and Romanticism" (2007), Rorty "refuses to accept the referential theory of truth – that one of our beliefs can be true and represent reality" (105) and declares that the world is "our poem, not something that communicates information about itself to us through our senses" (117). That, again, might well be right. But like Lamarque and Barbero, Rorty would then have to accept the conclusions Nietzsche coherently deduced from these premises, and like them, Rorty is unwilling to.

Textualism and Common Sense

Textualism argues that a literary work is identical with the text that constitutes it. Thus, three books containing the exact text of *Moby Dick* constitute three copies of the one artwork known as *Moby Dick*. This view is founded upon the distinction between type

and token, originally formulated by C. S. Peirce in “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism” (1906). Tokens are the physical copies of a certain text, while type is the abstract entity. The distinction is what allows us to say that we are looking at two copies of *Moby Dick*: two tokens of one type. And because the type is an abstract entity, it must pre-exist its tokens as a logical possibility in language. Therefore, the totality of types matches the totality of possible strings of words in a given language.

So far, this theory conforms to common sense, but one of its corollaries is that types are eternal entities that exist prior to becoming tokens in their empirical manifestation, which means that there can be no such thing as literary creations.⁹ Rather, novels are discovered just as the equations of physics are. Melville discovered *Moby Dick* like Einstein discovered general relativity.¹⁰

This violation of common sense moves Barbero to write that “the so-called ‘textualist’ position, [...] however intuitive and at first glance convincing, is difficult to accept in its entirety” (2013, 56; my translation). Likewise, Lamarque states that textualism is “predictably rare given its counter-intuitiveness” (2009, 74). Yet, this exhibits another problem in contemporary philosophy of literature (which often affects the humanities in general): common sense is often treated as the a priori truth which does not need to be proven and, accordingly, theories are evaluated on the basis of their ability to conform to common sense. But if stringent logical argument shows that common sense is wrong, then it is common sense that must change, not the logical argument. In addition, the value of philosophy has always been that of questioning common sense, that is, that of testing our beliefs. What is the value of philosophical inquiry if it can only adhere to common sense beliefs?

In the name of common sense, Copernicus and Galileo were called madmen. Today, we want to think of ourselves as very much evolved from our medieval past and yet we still dogmatically seek refuge in common sense views, just as our ancestors did, by brushing theories aside because they do not conform to our preconceptions. We perhaps do this more than ever before—at least since G. E. Moore’s essay in defence of common sense ([1925] 2002) launched a whole new wave of common sense philosophy.

Descartes wrote his *Discourse on Method* ([1637] 2017) to caution us about the prejudices we express when we refuse to question what we arbitrarily take for granted. In *On Certainty* ([1969] 2009), Wittgenstein defined common sense as our “unfounded

9 Joseph Margolis (1980) argues, to the contrary, that types have no existence apart from their embodiment in tokens; that is, that types must not be confused with universals. Against Margolis, I would present the same argument that I outline in the last section of this article against Russell and Goodman.

10 As Peter Kivy ([1983] 1993) writes, that art is discovered rather than created takes nothing away from the recognition of the ability of the artist (just as the fact that Einstein discovered relativity—he did not create it—takes nothing away from his value as a scientist; in fact, it constitutes his value as a scientist).

way of operating,” a social code with no rational legitimisation which nonetheless guides our whole existences. This is why every molecule within us struggles to consider ideas that run contrary to it. To give up one of our common sense beliefs is equivalent to seeing part of the structure that holds our life together fall to pieces. But this emotional process does not constitute a rational argument, and it should ideally be overcome when rationality shows that an opposing idea might be correct—as it might be the case with textualism in philosophy of literature.

The Need for Metaphysics

Based on everything we have said so far, the nature of literature can be understood only through correct metaphysics. For example, whether the novel is and can function as mimesis—as outlined by Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis* ([1946] 1953) and Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* ([1966] 2001)—depends on whether it is possible to faithfully represent the objective truth of reality through words, which in turn depends on myriad other aspects of reality. If one does not explore these matters, one cannot even begin to formulate a theory of literature, or a counterargument to Auerbach and Watt.

In truth, the debate between literary cognitivism (the belief that literature offers truths about the world) and anti-cognitivism (the belief that it cannot) is one between two opposing metaphysics. What Barthes and Foucault respectively write in “The Death of the Author” ([1967] 1977) and “What is an Author?” ([1969] 2020) is a consequence of their attack on the notion of the autonomous rational subject, that is, a consequence of what they think “human being” means. And Barthes’s denial of the role of intentionality in a text’s meaning follows from his understanding of language formulated in *Writing Degree Zero* ([1953] 2010).

Likewise, the debate between contextualists and textualists is one about the nature of entities such as “language,” “author,” “individual” etc.; that between intentionalists and anti-intentionalists is one about the meaning of “act,” “intention,” “creation,” etc.; that between constructivism (the idea that interpretations define the meaning of the text, which therefore changes overtime) and historicism (the idea that the meaning of the text remains the same, only its interpretations change) is one about the meaning of “meaning”; and that between monism (the idea that there is one objective truth in a given text) and pluralism (the idea that multiple conflicting interpretations of a text can be true) is one about the nature of truth.

Whether any of these outlooks is right depends on whether any of them is based on the correct interpretation of reality. This is perhaps most explicit in the debates between essentialist and anti-essentialist theories, which themselves are about the nature of truth. Among the essentialist theories of literature we find (a) the mimetic theory, which sees literature as an imitation of reality and is grounded on the belief that reality is an objective entity separated from human consciousness, but which human consciousness can grasp and represent; (b) the effect theory (Aristotle), which identifies the work with

its effect on the audience and depends on a vision of human beings as free, autonomous agents operating in the casual chain of events; (c) the expression theory (Croce [1902] 1992), which sees in the artwork an expression of the author's genius and requires that human beings are able to freely communicate their actual subjectivity through language; and (d) the autonomy theory (Constant [1816] 1980; Poe [1846] 2003), which stands by the principle "art for art's sake" and entails that beauty is a value in itself.

On the other hand, anti-essentialist theories themselves entirely reduce to metaphysics. Barbero writes that in investigating the nature of literature "we must be content with shared characteristics, similarities, sets of satisfied conditions, bearing in mind the Wittgensteinian admonition that it is not always possible in philosophy to find a definition of one's object of investigation" (2013, 25–26; my translation). But this is true only if Wittgenstein was right, and Wittgenstein knew this, which is why he devoted his life to trying to define the meaning of the world, of logic, of language, from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) to the *Philosophical Investigations* ([1953] 1986) and *On Certainty* (1969). We cannot do philosophy of literature and declare that metaphysics can be ignored.¹¹

Ontology of Fictional Objects

The necessity of metaphysical investigation is most evident when discussing the nature of fictional objects, on which our definition of literature obviously depends.

11 Wittgenstein formulated the most-subscribed anti-essentialist theory of our time with his notion of family resemblances. This theory postulates that there is no essential feature which connects different objects; rather, objects are connected by multiple overlapping similarities. This theory offers a new method for understanding identity, similarity, and difference; and obviously, trying to argue against it would require a separate set of works. But with this footnote, I want to (a) acknowledge that Wittgenstein famously criticised the essentialism I outlined above, and (b) indicate what I think constitutes the definitive counterargument to Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism. Ultimately, Wittgenstein's argument is a rejection of the ancient theory that every object possesses both necessary and contingent properties. Wittgenstein's argument for family resemblances is an argument to defend the claim that there are only contingent properties—while necessary properties (i.e., essences) are an illusion of traditional philosophy. Thus, for Wittgenstein, there can be no necessary property (i.e., no essence) that all human beings must share to be human beings, for example, because all properties of a human being are contingent. Yet, this idea leads to clear contradictions which are hard to see in the case of complex systems which we struggle to understand—just like we struggle to understand what a human being is—but are easy to see with simpler examples. Consider the group of "sentient beings": for Wittgenstein, because no property can be necessary (i.e., because there can be no essence), then there must be examples of sentient beings that have no consciousness; otherwise, having consciousness would be an essential feature of being sentient. See how this is contradictory? There can be no sentient being without consciousness, and this is why being conscious is essential to being a sentient being. Examples of this kind are infinite. The theory of family resemblances attracted so many thinkers because we do not know where to find the essence of most of our complex concepts, but it ultimately only offers an escape from our inabilities, and a contradictory one.

Eliminativism—the theory that mental phenomena do not exist, held by the likes of Russell (1995), Quine ([1960] 2013), and Walton (1990)—holds that all fictional content is false because it cannot be said of it that it is, that is, that it really exists out there in the world.¹² Therefore, every fictional utterance is false because it attributes existence (or Being) to what does not exist (or is not). For example, Russell famously said of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* ([1603]2013) that “the propositions in the play are false because there was no such man” (1995, 294). And Goodman stated that “all fiction is literal, literary falsehood” (1984, 124). According to this theory, the propositions are false because there is no person called Hamlet out there in the world who corresponds to the play’s description. On the other hand, the realism of Meinong’s “The Theory of Objects” ([1904] 1981) argues that literature speaks of entities that are, because if we can talk about them, then they must be.¹³ This view is based on the most ancient principle of ontology—the principle of non-contradiction as originally defined by Parmenides and Aristotle: of nothingness we cannot speak; therefore, if we can speak of something, that something must be, whatever its mode of being is. Therefore, the “golden mountain” in some sense *is*, even if it does not *exist* out there in the world. This is Meinong’s view. But another possible view is that of Emanuele Severino: he argues that the “golden mountain”—because we can speak of it—must both be and exist, because everything that appears to the mind is experienced and therefore exists. In other words, to say that the “golden mountain” does not exist is to say that “the golden mountain, even as a simple image, is nothing; so that [...] to say that the golden mountain does not exist (or is nothing) is a contradiction” (1989, 239; my translation). Therefore, as Severino writes, we must say of everything that it exists “according to the mode of existence that suits it” (1972, 67; my translation).¹⁴

We will not be able to perfectly outline a conclusive theory of fictional objects here, but to close, it is useful to demonstrate why the theory illustrated by Russell and Goodman—albeit adhering to common sense—must be wrong. This should indicate the necessity of ontological inquiry in literary theory and therefore the need for scholars to recover the traditional methods of philosophy.¹⁵

12 This refers to the Russell of *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. Russell’s final theory of mind and matter took mental phenomena to be real and described them as being what is known without inference.

13 Meinong’s work is itself related to Russell’s *The Principles of Mathematics* ([1903] 2018); in addition, Meinong asserts that some things are “beyond being and non-being”—clearly, the relationship between Russell and Meinong is much more complex than what we can explore in this short closure on the ontology of fictional objects.

14 For extended analyses of Severino’s work, see Pitari (2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b).

15 This final argument does not address the theorisation of fiction according to speech act theory—as most notably formulated by Jonathan Culler (1976, 1982, 1992). This is because, while I believe that such theory would be subject to the same criticism outlined in this section, applying the same argument to speech act theory would require a far longer article because speech act theory attributes different ontological statuses to different kinds of utterances and, therefore, applying the argument to it would require a lot of ontological sorting out.

According to Russell's and Goodman's theories, fiction is false because it violates the most fundamental principle of rationality—the principle of noncontradiction—as described by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*: “to say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true” (1998, 26).

This is once again an ontological–metaphysical theory: it presupposes the correspondence theory of truth (i.e., the idea that a proposition, to be true, must refer to something out there) and that existence belongs only to material things (in this case, “Hamlet” can “exist” only if he is flesh-and-blood). Yet, this common sense theory is highly questionable. Why should fictional objects refer to something outside themselves? Why should reference to something out there be the only arbiter of truth? Why should “material” existence be the only possible kind of existence?

Some 2500 years ago, Parmenides warned us: “For never shall this be forced: that things that are not exist” (1965, 73); “you could not know that which does not exist (because it is impossible) nor could you express it” (1965, 32). What is not (i.e., what does not exist), is nothingness, and nothingness cannot appear, and what cannot appear is not available to human thought, speech, or knowledge. It is thus impossible to think, speak, and know of what is not. Therefore, with their theory that fiction is false because it speaks of the non-existent, Russell and Goodman violate the principle of non-contradiction while trying to defend it: by postulating that *Hamlet* speaks of a non-existing entity, they postulate the possibility of speaking of what is not, and they thus violate the Parmenidean law.

Just like all other objects, the propositions of *Hamlet* appear, and so does the character “Hamlet” to which the propositions refer. Therefore, precisely because all these things appear, they *are*, and therefore they exist: “Hamlet” exists according to its mode of existence. Thus, the claim that the propositions in *Hamlet* refer to nothing is false. Yet, one might say that according to Russell the propositions in *Hamlet* are false because they speak of a flesh-and-blood human being. But this too is false, because the propositions in *Hamlet* affirm the existence of a fictional character named “Hamlet,” not of a flesh-and-blood human being named “Hamlet.” As David Lewis (1978) argued, all descriptions of fictional characters should be understood to implicitly begin with the operator “In such-and-such fiction ...” Therefore, there is thus no ontological falsehood in *Hamlet*. “Hamlet” exists and the propositions in the play attribute to the character its proper mode of existence.

What seems false, thus, is the theory that treats only material things as real. We can say this because said theory violates the principle of non-contradiction by speaking of things while saying that those things are nothing. Everything that appears—whatever its mode of appearance—exists. The golden mountain exists in the proper mode of existence that belongs to it. The reality of fictional objects is what allows their appearance in thought. If they were nothing, if they did not exist, we could not imagine them, nor talk about them, nor mistakenly affirm their falsity or non-existence. The nature of fictional objects

is a great reminder of the problems we face in philosophy of literature and of the need for ontological inquiry to solve them.¹⁶

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16 This final argument was previously presented in Pitari (2022c).

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