

# Beautiful Truth and Truthful Beauty: On the Cognitive Value of Art

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## Introduction

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

These famous lines by John Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” have been the subject of a great deal of debate and discussion within literary circles. In this article, however, I do not intend to enter into this debate. Rather, my interest lies elsewhere, in what Keats suggests in these lines in a more general sense: the cognitive or truth value of art. In an even broader way, this can be connected to the question of form and content. As Martha Nussbaum writes, “Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.”<sup>2</sup> Such a cognitivist view has several supporters and can even be extended to other art forms as well. In his inaugural address as Professor of Theological Aesthetics at VU University Amsterdam, Wessel Stoker argued that, although art does involve the values of form, beauty, and emotion, in the end the value that accounts for why great works of art have such influence is the fact that they yield insights.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, this view has its detractors as well, those who champion the ‘no truth theory’ of aesthetic appreciation. Among these, of

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<sup>2</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3, cf. p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Wessel Stoker, *God, meester in de kunsten: Een herweging van de theologische esthetiek* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006), p. 6. A shorter English version of this was published in the online journal *Ars Disputandi*.

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course, would be the deconstructionists, i.e., those who object to cognitivism on the basis that there is no truth to be had. Other detractors, however, oppose the cognitivist view of art or literature because, while holding to a more or less traditional view of truth, they view truth as lying outside the realm of art (appreciation). An aesthetic appreciation does not require an evaluation of truth claims made in or by a work of art. This is the modest claim. The even stronger claim is that the question of truth actually stands in the way of proper aesthetic appreciation. It is the modest claim, which is the far more interesting and pregnant of the two, to which we will direct our attention.

Does truth itself have a place in art or is truth extrinsic to the appreciation of art? That is the question I would like to explore in this article. First, I will begin with sketching the case for truth and then present the argument against truth in art. How do both stand up to each other? I will argue in the end for a more nuanced view of the issue: we need a more varied approach to art than what is often presently available. Second, I will argue that there need to be qualifications on both sides of the issue. Both sides of the debate appear to engage in overly generalized statements about the nature of art and its relation to truth or teaching. Given our discussion in the first section, we must also conclude that the ‘truth content’ any work of art is intended to have must also be treated in any aesthetic appreciation of the work of art. Art that teaches unintentionally must also be evaluated with respect to what it teaches or, better perhaps, what we can learn from it. Art that is not intended to teach need not be evaluated on that score. Finally, I will argue that the notion of ‘truth’ needs to be properly understood in order to be of value in the discussion. The understanding of truth on which objections to the cognitivist theory is based needs to be qualified. Here developments in the philosophy of religion can be of help.

### **Cognitive Value of Art?**

Support for the cognitivist approach to art and literature usually focuses on the depth of our understanding of the world to which art can contribute. Berys Gaut argues, for instance, that “art teaches us nontrivially about the world,”<sup>4</sup> and, further, that it “is partly *because* a work is profound that it is

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<sup>4</sup> Berys Gaut, ‘Art and Cognition’, in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kiernan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 118.

a good work of literature.”<sup>5</sup> Gaut is careful to qualify his view by saying that cognitivists should embrace pluralism, i.e., the position that truth is only one of the aspects that are involved in an evaluation of art.<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum elucidates the claim quoted in our introduction further in the following paragraph by stating:

But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.<sup>7</sup>

According to Nussbaum, the form that the philosophical content a novel demands is that of the novel. Nussbaum writes further on: “for an interesting family of such views, a literary narrative of a certain sort is the only type of text that can state them fully and fittingly, without contradiction.”<sup>8</sup> The novel form is demanded because of the “world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty.” Thus, the ostensible, foundational reason for a cognitivist approach to literature is that it reflects the complexity and mysteriousness of the world. Nussbaum goes on to apply this to ethical concerns in literature, arguing that the writer of tragic drama or the novel “expresses already certain evaluative commitments... to the ethical significance of uncontrolled events, to the epistemological value of emotion, to the variety and non-commensurability of the important things.”<sup>9</sup> She ties these commitments to an Aristotelian conception of ethics.<sup>10</sup> Here again, the fundamental issue is one of truth: “The proposal is that we should add the study of certain novels to the study of these works [by Kantians and Utilitarians], on the grounds that without them we will not have a fully adequate statement of a powerful ethical conception, one that we ought to investigate.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is only in literature that we can find such an adequate statement.

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<sup>5</sup> Gaut, ‘Art and Cognition’, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> Gaut, ‘Art and Cognition’, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 27.

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Similarly, Noël Carroll argues that literature (literary fictions) “can afford knowledge of concepts, such as concepts of virtue, by stimulating the reader to an awareness, through reflective self-analysis, of the conditions, rules, and criteria for her application of said concepts.”<sup>12</sup> And one of the reasons it does so is because “they are much richer in detail – about motives, feelings, circumstances, social relations, and interconnected personality traits – than typical philosophical arguments.”<sup>13</sup> Here too we see the emphasis on the complexity of life and reality emerging. This is the reason, it seems, why literature deals with truth, why it gives us truth: it yields knowledge of the complexity of the world, which in turn influences the choices we make.

This, however, raises some issues. Is this a matter of ‘truth’? And how closely is it connected to form and aesthetic appreciation? One of the primary arguments against the cognitivist position was that articulated by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in *Truth, Fiction and Literature*.<sup>14</sup> Lamarque and Olsen do not object to truth in fiction; they do not object to the notion of literature teaching us nor to our being able to learn from literature, aside from whatever details of history and geography novels might contain. They even maintain that we can learn morals and so forth from literature. What they object to is that any notion of aesthetic appreciation is to be connected with any truth value afforded by literature. They write:

Our principal debate is with those who want a ‘stronger’ sense of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ applied to literature; i.e. those who see the aim of literature as conveying or teaching or embodying universal truths about human nature, the human condition, and so on, in a sense at least analogous to that in which scientific, or psychological, or historical hypotheses can express general truths.<sup>15</sup>

They argue that attention to truth questions is not only wrongheaded because one is dealing with literary works but also detrimental to the nature of literary works themselves, which is, as we stated above, the stronger

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<sup>12</sup> Noël Carroll, ‘The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2001), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Carroll, ‘The Wheel of Virtue’, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). See also Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, ‘The Philosophy of Literature: Pleasure Restored’, in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. Peter Livy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 195-214.

<sup>15</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 6.

thesis. Such thinking, in their view, subordinates literature to philosophy.<sup>16</sup> The line running through all these arguments against a cognitivist view of art and literature has to do with the definition of truth. In a later publication, Lamarque states:

The shift away from propositional knowledge marks a difficulty cognitivists have with truth per se. The truth of art is an elusive creature and, in the hands of the artistic truth-theorist, can come to look like something less than the notion familiar to philosophers, scientists, and historians. I. A. Richards, for example, held that the “scientific sense” of “truth” is “little involved by any of the arts” and that within criticism “truth” most often means “acceptability” and “sincerity” (Richards 1926: 212-13). Colin Falck describes artistic truth as “ontological truth” (Falck 1989: 74) without saying exactly what that is. Other conceptions include “truth to” (Hospers 1946), or “a kind of transcendence” (Murdoch 1992: 86), or “poetic truth... unverifiable... but operative” (Day Lewis 1947: ch 1), or “authenticity” (Walsh 1969), or the “concrete universal” (Wimsatt 1954), or “depth meaning” (Weitz 1943, 1955). This motley of conceptions shows the uneasiness of artistic cognitivists with ordinary notions of truth. But if artistic truth is just truthfulness or sincerity or a kind of symbolic meaning then the discussion shifts. Truthfulness and integrity might well be artistic values, in which case the controversy withers away.<sup>17</sup>

Lamarque thus argues, as he did with Olsen in *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, that literature, and by extension art, cannot be evaluated in terms of truth. Truth does not equal truthfulness and integrity. The very general propositions that literature yields represent “perspectives on the world which can be adopted, qualified, or rejected without much impact elsewhere.”<sup>18</sup>

The understanding of truth that Lamarque and Olsen have is that of a minimal correspondence theory, following Aristotle: “to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”<sup>19</sup> If truth is viewed in this way, then one may indeed raise the question as to whether it makes sense to

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<sup>16</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 385.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Lamarque, ‘Cognitive Values in the Arts’, in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kiernan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Lamarque, ‘Cognitive Values in the Arts’, p. 137

<sup>19</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, pp. 6ff. The definition from Aristotle is taken from his *Metaphysics* (1011b25-28). Lamarque argues in ‘Cognitive Values in the Arts’ that in order to make the cognitive claim work, the cognitivist has to appeal to representational arts since these require some correspondence to fact, pp. 130ff. Even in portraiture, however, this is impossible because portraiture itself is not simply and only concerned with correspondence to facts.

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talk about truth in connection with works of art. This view of truth demands that the ‘truth’ that, for example, a poem expresses should be able to be paraphrased, like ‘truths’ in science can be paraphrased. In this view of truth there is an external referent against which I can measure the ‘truth’. The scientific claim that ‘the raven is black’ can easily be tested and paraphrased: there is an external referent, i.e., a black raven. The poetic claim ‘the raven is black’, with the possible suggestion of the ominous nature of the raven being black, cannot be tested against an external referent. Only its ‘literal truth’, its factuality, can be tested, and, from a poetic point of view, such a truth is uninteresting. The further suggestions of the meanings of the raven’s blackness are contained within the poem. The ‘truth’ of this cannot be separated from the poem, cannot be taken out of that context; it makes sense only within the poem. In that sense, there is no external referent to test this. The meaning (content) of this claim can only be understood in its context (its form). Thus, poetic truth, because of the unity of form and content, cannot be tested by an external referent.<sup>20</sup> How could the ‘truth’ of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “The Windhover” be tested? Against the hypothesis that a falcon soars gracefully on the wind? But that is hardly a test of the truth of Hopkin’s poem. The meaning of the poem is, according to the unity of form and content, self-contained; it has no external referent. Moreover, truth in the scientific, Aristotelian sense has to do with universals. Art, on the other hand, deals with particularities. A novel is, allegedly, about this man, this woman, this place, etc. It is not about man or woman or humankind. Therefore, it cannot convey universals.<sup>21</sup>

The question to ask now is if such a critique holds up. Does this theory of truth hold up under scrutiny? The critique appears to have had some effect. It is precisely because of such difficulties with the notion of truth that Gordon Graham has opted for the term ‘understanding’ in his *Philosophy of the Arts*, rather than truth. Graham does not define this term as such but appears to associate it with gaining insight and depth in our view of life or experience.<sup>22</sup> But does this solve the problem or merely shift

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<sup>20</sup> Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 60-61. See also Gordon Graham, ‘Learning from Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1995), pp. 26-37.

<sup>21</sup> Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>22</sup> Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, pp. 57-58.

it? The term ‘understanding’ may not be as loaded as the term ‘poetic truth’ or similar terms, but it does not escape the problem entirely. ‘Understanding’ does have the air of a truth claim about it. If I claim to understand something, do I not therefore claim to ‘know’ something of its nature, something about what is and is not? If art does increase our understanding, then it does bring us closer to knowing the true nature of things. Thus, substitution of the word ‘understanding’ for ‘truth’ merely shifts the problem.

In what follows, I wish to do two things. First, I want to take a look at the argumentation that often appears to be used in the discussion. Then I will take a closer look at the understanding of ‘truth’ that is prevalent in the discussion.

### **Art and Truth**

What seems to be operative here on both sides of the question is the tendency to overgeneralize, to want to arrive at a normative understanding of art: all art and all literature should be like this. Both sides readily concede ground to the other. The cognitivists admit that they are not ruling out aesthetic experience or appreciation entirely, and the ‘no truth’ advocates do not deny that art can teach us something. But neither side seems to want to entertain the notion that such concession logically entails some adjustment to the theory.

It may well be that some or even a great deal of art lends itself to the cognitive value of truth, whereas other art does not. I have a painting at home by a local artist. As far as I am concerned, the painting does not require cognitive assessment. I simply love the way the colours work together and the impressions they cause in my mind. If it has any cognitive value at all, it is that it has increased my awareness of how certain colours can play off one another. But that is hardly high on the cognitive scale. To use another example, I am not a musician by any means and have no understanding beyond a rudimentary knowledge of how music works, as more than one person has felt it incumbent upon himself or herself to inform me. I still remember the first time I ever heard Pachelbel’s *Canon in D Major* about 30 years ago when I was a college student. I used to study in a separate room in the library where music would be piped in over an intercom system from the music area of the library. I was studying intensely when Pachelbel’s *Canon* started to play. As it played, I began to listen more and more closely and intensely. When it was done, I was unable

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to study, my mind distracted and disturbed by the music I had just heard. I left the library to go down to the lobby where I just sat and smoked (still allowed in those days) and tried to find my mental footing once again. Although Pachelbel's *Canon* has not had that intense an effect on me since, it still never fails to move me. I do not know if there is some cognitive value to Pachelbel's *Canon*, and I am not sure it would make any difference to me. If my experience is of any weight in this matter, then it seems I'm having an aesthetic experience without cognitive value.

In short, I do not see that we are forced to choose between normative theories of art, whether cognitivist or otherwise. Why can some art not be simply aesthetic and other art cognitivist or emotive? What necessitates art being all of one kind? Furthermore, why can a simply aesthetic work not be as powerful in its way as any cognitive piece? Graham argues:

In contrast to aesthetic hedonism, which must interpret such commitment as an excessive pursuit of pleasure, or aestheticism which makes it an effete absorption with beautiful objects, or expressivism which must interpret it as an unintelligible wallowing in emotional turbulence, dedication to art, like dedication to science, can be understood as an application to the Delphic ideal – ‘Man, know thyself!’<sup>23</sup>

Why should the pursuit of pleasure, aestheticism, or expressivism lead to these extremes that Graham paints here? If a work of art is simply designed to convey pleasure or to be a beautiful object, there can, in my view, be no objection to that. Does it really need to be anything more? A work of art is a work of art, of whatever kind it is, and we should probably avoid normative theories. In line with this, however, we should also be wary of stating too generally what we can learn from art. Much is made of the complexity of life that narratives and/or novels present over against a philosophical system, as pointed out above.<sup>24</sup> Narratives, novels, and other works of literature provide a richer, more multifaceted view of the world and people than systems do. Such a claim is similar to the case Robert Alter made for the second Scriptural account of

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<sup>23</sup> Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> I have earlier made this case myself. Cf. Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 214ff.

creation, which sees its subject (humankind) “in a complex network of relations that are causal, temporal, mechanical, and later in the chapter, moral and psychological as well.”<sup>25</sup> But Alter is contrasting this not with systematic or philosophical thinking but with another literary form: the poetry found in the first account, in which, “Coherence is the keynote of creation. Things come into being in orderly progression, measured in a numerical sequence which is defined by the sacred number seven.”<sup>26</sup>

And this leads to another point. Lamarque points out that, “It is often thought to be a flaw in a work of imaginative literature that it pursues intellectual ideas in too explicit or philosophical a manner. Certainly readers do not expect novels to argue for points of view (even though individual characters might do so – a fact that can help understand the characters better).”<sup>27</sup> This raises a host of questions. First, by whom is it often thought and why? This seems largely a modern development. Although Pope’s *Essay on Man* might be an exception in the world of literature,<sup>28</sup> in the past literature was on the whole concerned with teaching. This was true of the ancient Greeks,<sup>29</sup> and much of Western history. Morality and mystery plays in the Middle Ages were also designed to teach. Chaucer and Shakespeare were also among those who taught. Biblical literature itself was often included in this. The stories in the Old Testament are now recognized to be exquisite works of art. The parables and gospels are also considered to be literary works, and not just records or accounts. The ‘truth’ aspect of these stories is often a matter of debate – what can be seen as fact and what role do facts play in them?<sup>30</sup> – but they are nonetheless considered to be literary works designed to teach something. This is also true of more recent literature, of which Dickens’ *Hard Times* is a classic

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 143.

<sup>27</sup> Lamarque, ‘Cognitive Values in the Arts’, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 392.

<sup>29</sup> See Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> See my discussion in Jansen, ‘Poetics and the Bible: Facts and Biblical Hermeneutics’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1999), pp. 22-38.

example. Is Dickens good literature? To play Lamarque's own numbers game, there are plenty who think so. But Dickens wants to teach his readers something about what is at stake in the utilitarian and industrial mindset of nineteenth-century England. The book is well-crafted and hangs together as a literary piece.

So where does this leave us? It allows the question of truth to function as a literary criterion. It applies first of all to those works that only implicitly teach something. Perhaps, in the end, if I were to learn some more about music, I could be taught by Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major*. Novels and poems, or any literary creation – and this applies also to films – by necessity make choices about where to begin, what to include, what to exclude. As Nussbaum puts it: “The telling itself – the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life – all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections.”<sup>31</sup> So, if there is any kind of selection going on, unacknowledged, it is important to understanding the novel to determine what selections have been made and why. Why that particular point of view and not another? What is it intended to communicate? Such selection invites agreement or disagreement. While these questions can be answered to a certain extent by narrative techniques,<sup>32</sup> they cannot be answered entirely on that basis. The selection is often also based in worldview or philosophical considerations.

In cases where the work of art is explicitly intended to teach, it does become part of the aesthetic appreciation of the work in question. Dickens' *Hard Times* is such a work. It is intended to teach readers in nineteenth-century England about the dehumanizing effects of not only the industrial revolution but also the mindset that accompanied it, and everything in that novel is geared to that end. Insofar as such a mindset is still present today, the novel's 'teaching' is still relevant. It is only in recognizing the place of that idea that the novel works. It is not simply

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<sup>31</sup> See Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion and analysis of narrative techniques, see Edwin Koster, *In betovering gevangen? Over verhaal en rationaliteit, religie en irrationaliteit* (Damon: Budel 2005), pp. 140-153.

an organizing theme, as Lamarque and Olsen would have it, but an actual explicit goal of the novel.

Lamarque raises another point, however, concerning the reading of Hume's *Dialogues on Human Nature* as philosophy and as literature. If this is read as the latter, he asks, where one is not asked to endorse the philosophical argument, "Could not the bishop as well as the atheist admire its literary qualities? Arguably the literary value of such a work is not vested in its philosophical soundness but in its structure and tone, its use of dialogue as rhetorical device, its wit, its irony, or the consonance of ends and means."<sup>33</sup> In the first place, if one takes the unity of form and content seriously, it is incomprehensible to me how one could separate the literary qualities from the argument. Is it not so that the argument proceeds by way of the literary devices?<sup>34</sup> If one were to disagree with a certain step in the argument where a literary device was used to bring home a point, would that not affect one's assessment of the work aesthetically as well? Moreover, apart from that, does appreciation of a work as literature entail that one appreciate all aspects of the work? Might one not claim, for instance and hypothetically, that Hume's use of irony and wit is superb, but his use of dialogue as a rhetorical device is faulty or defective? Why, then, could one not argue that, while his use of literary devices is brilliant, they are also misguided or wrong, and thus, for a bishop, his work to that extent is aesthetically displeasing? It is not at all clear why one should have a positive view of all the so-called literary aspects in order to appreciate the work in a literary sense.

One could go even further here. It could be argued that if the theme of Dickens' *Hard Times* was the 'condition-of-England' question, along with poverty, industrialization, etc., and if the truth of the novel is tied to that theme, then *Hard Times* becomes of mere historical interest.<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, one is inclined to say: Would that it were *only* of historical interest! But the 'condition-of-England' question is not the theme of Dickens' novel as such. The theme is the dehumanizing

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<sup>33</sup> Lamarque, 'Cognitive Values in the Arts', p. 132.

<sup>34</sup> Koster arrived at the same conclusion. See Koster, *In betovering gevangen?*, pp. 340-45.

<sup>35</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 426. One does wonder, however, what would be wrong as such with something being of 'mere' historical interest.

effects of industrialization and utilitarianism, and dehumanization in the name of modernization and globalization is still a very current concern, paralleling those of nineteenth-century England. To be sure, this can be said in other ways and perhaps more direct ways. But the point of the novel is not simply that: rather, what the novel revolves around is the whole presentation of two ways of life at odds with each other (the life of the circus and the life of the utilitarian Coketown), and all the elements of the novel are geared toward that. It is not simply about the ‘condition-of-England’ question. Rather, it dramatizes two ways of life and the consequences of those ways of life for human beings. It is not what is on the surface of the ‘condition-of-England’ that continues to make the novel powerful but what lies underneath it. The way the story is told, the way the characters are drawn and characterized all reinforce the idea behind the novel. And it is that particular way of telling that makes the novel so pointed and unforgettable.

But such would be, in the viewpoint of the ‘no truth’ theory advocated by Lamarque and Olsen, simply a perspective, an insight, and not the same as a propositional truth, an understanding. What about the theory of truth they claim lies at the basis of the argument? To that issue we will now turn.

### **Truth as a Criterion**

As pointed out above, Lamarque and Olsen argue for a propositional definition of truth based on Aristotle. At the same time, they reject the equation of ‘truth’ with terms like ‘sincerity’, ‘authenticity’, etc.<sup>36</sup> Here Lamarque and Olsen seem to be on fairly certain ground. And many cognitivists are with agreement on them on this score. That is why Graham prefers to speak of ‘understanding’ rather than truth. M.W. Rowe also appears to accept that definition of truth and spends the majority of an article arguing against Lamarque and Olsen for the importance of data and facts for literature.<sup>37</sup> What Rowe has to say on this issue is important in itself, but it seems to me that such attempts

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<sup>36</sup> See p. 53 above and Lamarque, ‘Cognitive Values in the Arts’, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> M. W. Rowe, ‘Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth’, *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 188 (1997), pp. 322-341.

approach the issue wrongly. If truth is understood in this way, then it seems that Lamarque and Olsen have won their case. For if it is indeed only insights and ill-defined ‘ontological truth’ that literature yields, then they are right: literature will not be able to meet the standards of ‘truth’, at least as far as fiction is concerned.<sup>38</sup> As stated above, the attempt to replace ‘truth’ by ‘understanding’ does not solve the problem. The question to ask is: Is that the only view of truth available – propositional truth that fits the correspondence model?

Is, then, that definition of truth as basic as Lamarque and Olsen claim it is? Is the minimal correspondence theory of truth sufficient? This seems difficult to maintain. What people generally hold as true involves much more than such a minimal correspondence theory. Works of literature offer models by which to understand life. To respond to a novel by saying ‘This is true’ or ‘This is not true’ is not simply to accept or reject a perspective as the final word on an issue. It is to accept or reject a truth claim about how the world is, about how I am to understand the world. If I read a novel that asks me to accept premises or conclusions that go against what I have learned and been taught to believe, such as *The Da Vinci Code*, whatever other literary qualities the novel might have, the fact that it fails to present a convincing case is a matter of aesthetic judgement. Here truth and aesthetics converge. If the facts do not add up, I can reject the conclusion and the novel as aesthetically unsound. I am accepting or rejecting the model or paradigm.

But is this, again, a matter of accepting or rejecting ‘understanding’ or ‘truth?’ Is this not merely a matter of a perspective that we can accept or reject? Certainly it is a perspective, but that does not make it less true as such. A parallel here may be found in religion. Religions have never viewed truth simply in the straightforward propositional way that Lamarque and Olsen advocate. Hendrik M. Vroom has argued that basic experiences such as suffering, responsibility, finitude, etc. can produce a change in one’s thinking:

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<sup>38</sup> The exception, of course, would be literary creations where ‘facts’ do seem to matter.

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these experiences make truth claims.<sup>39</sup> This is also the case with stories, either fictional or historical: they make a truth claim and demand a response. In an earlier publication, *Religions and the Truth*, Vroom argued for a multiplicity of truth. He distinguishes five types of truth in religion, of which only the first three of interest to us here.<sup>40</sup> The first two are *doctrina* and *veritates*. The former has to do with public knowledge. For those most familiar with Christian circles this would be what is covered in catechisms and confessions of faith.<sup>41</sup> In a more secular worldview, this could be viewed as surface knowledge. But even this is more than simply knowledge of facts and data. It also concerns a way of looking at the world. *Veritates* is appropriated religious truth and concerns the interiorization of such truth, which involves a shift in perspective.<sup>42</sup> In this phase we do not merely assent to the doctrines on an objective level but come to have a different perspective on reality. The third category, *religio vera*, is lived truth.<sup>43</sup> Here religions emphasize that truth is not only a matter of knowing but also a matter of being. Truth is not just a matter of what we claim; it is also a matter of what we do, of how we are. There is a steady progression in truth here: from objective truth to interiorization of the truth to lived truth. In the final stage of the progression truth becomes more than factual and propositional truth.

Although Vroom focuses on biblical and or religious/worldview stories, his point holds for novels or poems as well. Without equating art with religion or making it a substitute for religion, works of art and literature certainly function in this way. A full appreciation of Hopkins' "The Windhover" requires our assent that this is true in a deep, profound way, beyond minimal correspondence. We read the poem and

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<sup>39</sup> Hendrik M. Vroom, 'Religious Truth: Seeing Things as They Really Are. Experience, Insight, and Religious Stories', in *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives*, eds Frederiek Depoortere and Magdalen Lambkin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 115-135.

<sup>40</sup> Hendrik M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 302ff. Less relevant are the fourth, the experience of truth (*intellectus verus*), and the fifth, the transcendent itself as truth (*veritas*).

<sup>41</sup> Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 303.

<sup>42</sup> Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, pp. 307, 310.

<sup>43</sup> Vroom, *Religions and the Truth*, p. 311.

say: ‘Yes, this is true!’ A reading of *Hard Times* demands the same kind of assent: ‘This is true; this is the way the world is!’ We may know and assent to the belief that utilitarianism and industrialization dehumanizes people. But it is in reading *Hard Times* that we interiorize this knowledge. By sympathizing with certain characters, like Louisa and Sissy, and developing an antagonism towards others like Bounderby and Gradgrind, by experiencing the ugliness and squalor of Coketown as presented by Dickens’ storytelling talents, we appropriate this initial understanding. We see points of contact in the novel between the characters and ourselves, between the world as we experience it and the world as described in the novel, and the two worlds begin to merge to a certain extent. In this process the *doctrina* become *veritates*. This involves a shift in perspective. It is no longer merely objective but subjective. It becomes literally part of our consciousness. As a result, we begin to act and behave in ways that go counter to the bad effects of the industrial revolution and its way of viewing the world.

This is what I think what Lamarque calls ‘this motley of conceptions’ concerning ‘truth’ finally means. Literature is too serious not to be approached this way. It can persuade us to do bad acts or to act in ways that are undesirable. Or it can increase our understanding. It is in this way that terms like ‘understanding’ are connected to truth.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have looked at the question of truth in art and, more narrowly, in literature. Over against some vague thinking about the concept of truth in art and literature we attempted to provide some clarity about the nature of truth. We need a wider conception of art and of art’s purposes. Not all art is cognitivist in nature; it does not need to be. We do not need a normative description of art. Different types of art work in different ways, and we should accept that: a true pluralism of views concerning art. While admitting that the cognitive approach to art does not cover all art, it also allows us to evaluate art that is cognitivist in nature, either intentionally or unintentionally, in terms of the issue of truth.

The issue of truth, however, is not to be limited to the understanding of truth as propositional or factual. As we have seen, drawing upon Vroom’s reflections on truth in religion, truth is more

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variegated. There are degrees of truth and degrees of assent. Literature that is cognitivist in nature will demand our assent or rejection of its claims. If we assent to those claims, we interiorize them and are influenced by them in our way of life and the choices we make. This is what leads us to say of such a work of art: a beautiful truth or a truthful beauty. The two go hand in hand.