

Representation in Literature

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In recent years there has been a good deal of debate about whether literary works can contribute to knowledge of the world. Many of the writers who have held that literature has cognitive value have defended the traditional view that works of literature assert truths.¹ Other authors have focused on rehabilitating the concept of meaning. Literature is a source of knowledge (which involves truth and meaning) but any successful attempt to demonstrate that literature is a source of knowledge has to restore to a central place in literary theory a concept even more venerable than those of truth and meaning. I refer to the concept of representation. In spite of this, representation has received little attention in recent discussions of literature.² This essay is an attempt to compensate for this neglect. It is, however, only a prolegomena to a more complete defence of the cognitive value of literature. This essay defends the claim that literature represents, and indicates how it does so. It remains to show how literature's power to represent is the key to responding to those who deny the cognitive value of literature.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section provides a definition of representation and identifies two main issues that arise in the context of reflection about representation in literature. The first issue is that of whether literature can even properly be said to be representational. This question is addressed in Section II where it is argued that literature can represent. In Section III I turn to the second issue identified in Section I, that of the form of representation found in literature. I argue that the sort of representation found in literature is very different from the sort found in, for example, other uses of language. Section IV provides a conclusion.

I

Nowadays, when people talk about representation in connection with the arts, they usually have in mind the visual arts and pictorial representation. Nelson Goodman is at some pains to distinguish between description, which employs language, and representation, which involves another sort of symbol system. The view that works of literature represent can, however, be traced at least as far back as the *Poetics* and Aristotle's views have been echoed repeatedly. Sir Philip

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Sidney, for example, wrote that 'Poesy ... is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *μιμησις* [mimesis] ... with this end, to teach and delight'.³ Similarly, Tasso maintained that 'Poetry ... is an imitation of human action, fashioned to teach us how to live'.⁴ Dr Johnson goes so far as to say that Shakespeare 'holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life'.⁵ Novelists have similarly maintained that their works represent. Henry James held that 'The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life'.⁶ These quotations suggest that there is a sense in which literature represents and this essay defends this suggestion.

Before we can pursue the question of whether literature represents, a definition of representation is needed. I offer the following (stipulative) definition of a representation:

R is a representation of some object O if and only if R is intended by a subject S to stand for O and an audience A (where A is not identical to S) can recognise that R stands for O.

So defined, there are three necessary conditions of something's being a representation. For a start, if something is a representation of some object, it must stand for the object. Second, if something is a representation, it must be intentionally used as a representation. This may be called the intentionality condition. Finally, there is the recognition condition: nothing is a representation of an object unless it can be recognised as standing for the object by someone other than the person (or persons) who intends that it be a representation of the object. A few comments on each of these conditions are required, particularly an account of what it is for something to *stand for* something else.

Let us begin by considering the intentionality condition. The point of this condition is to indicate that nothing may accidentally be a representation. Imagine that a rock in the Australian outback is eroded, by the blind forces of nature, into a form that bears an uncanny resemblance to Charles Dickens. No matter how close the resemblance, the rock is not a representation of Dickens. Similarly, if some cracks should spontaneously develop in a rock face, and apparently spell out a description of Dickens, the cracks are not a representation of the novelist. The cracks are not actually sentences. They resemble sentences, but they have no meanings and no truth values since they are not the intentional products of a language-user. Perhaps if someone were to suggest that the cracks be treated as meaningful inscriptions they become such, but this is only because someone has come along and supplied the necessary intention to represent.

The recognition condition states that it is not sufficient that someone intend that something represent an object for the thing to represent the object. People other than the creator of the representation must in fact be able to determine what is represented. I may draw a squiggle, or write a paragraph with the intention of representing Jane Austen. If, however, no one besides myself can actually recognise that Austen is represented by my squiggle, then I have failed to represent her even though I intended to do so. (In other words, S may be a member of A, but may not exhaust A.)

The recognition condition does not require that, in any given case, everyone be able to recognise what something represents. Members of an audience will need to possess certain abilities if they are to recognise that an object is a representation. Many, perhaps all, representations are created in accordance with some rules or conventions. There are, for example, conventions of pictorial representation, and linguistic representation is entirely dependent on convention. Familiarity with these conventions is a necessary condition of being able to determine what is represented. In general, audience members will also need to be familiar with the object or objects represented, if they are to recognise that something is a representation. For example, an audience cannot recognise that a picture represents San Marco unless they know something about the appearance of the Venetian cathedral. So long as these conditions are met, however, if something is a representation, then an audience must be able to determine what is represented.

The most important condition of something's being a representation is that it stand for something. The key to understanding the concept of standing for is the concept of intentionality or aboutness. A representation is always about something. Consequently, for every representation there is some object which is represented, or objects which are represented. Someone who has the capacity to understand a representation has the capacity to grasp what it is about. A representation will, then, bring to the mind of the qualified audience member the object which is represented. So, for example, someone acquainted with the rules which Canaletto followed in producing paintings is able to recognise that some painting is a representation of San Marco or the Grand Canal. Similarly, someone who understands English and has a rudimentary knowledge of English geography will be able to recognise Jerome K. Jerome's description of the Thames, in *Three Men in a Boat*, as a representation of the river. The key point to note here is that if the intentionality and recognition conditions are met, then the third condition is also met. That is, if someone creates a work with the intention of

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representing an object, and suitably-qualified people can recognise that the object is represented (it is brought to mind), then the work stands for the object.

Two important points arise from what has been said so far about representation. The first point is that representations come in several varieties. On the present definition of representation, a description can count as a representation as much as can a picture. All three conditions of being a representation can be met by a description. An author can intend to represent an object and readers can recognise that a description stands for the object. The sort of representation found in *Three Men in a Boat* differs quite dramatically from the sort found in the Canaletto. Providing a taxonomy of the types of representation becomes even more difficult when we reflect that scientific theories may be said to represent the world and that we speak of mental representation. Such a taxonomy is necessary, however, if we are to understand that literature represents and how it does so. An account of literary representation will have to specify what form (or, perhaps, forms) of representation are found in literature.

The second point which has emerged in this section is even more fundamental. As noted, a representation always has an object which it is about. This feature of representations can give rise to scepticism about whether literature is, in general, representational. The descriptions of the Thames in *Three Men in a Boat* can represent the Thames, since there really is such a river. Many of the persons and objects which feature prominently in literature are fictional, however, and something that does not exist cannot be represented. (A non-existent object can, of course, be pictured or described, but these pictures and descriptions are not representations.) Elizabeth Bennet, Elizabeth's pianoforte, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Mr Collins, Longbourne, and other persons and things described in *Pride and Prejudice* do not exist. Consequently, they cannot be represented. Since so much of literature is fiction, a preliminary question needs to be addressed before we can go on to the question of what form literary representation takes. This is the question of whether literature represents at all.

II

Let us start with the question of whether literature is representational. Even those who are sceptical about the claim that literature is generally representational will allow that there are some instances of representation in literature. Real people and things are sometimes

represented in literature. Few will deny that *Three Men in a Boat* represents the Thames. Similarly, it is reasonably uncontroversial that *Bleak House* represents London, that *War and Peace* represents Napoleon, and so on. The class of literary representations can be expanded a little if we allow that some fictional characters represent real objects. For example, Harold Skimpole (in *Bleak House*) is a representation of Leigh Hunt, and the Grand Academy of Lagado, described in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*, is a representation of the Royal Society of Swift's day. Skimpole and the Grand Academy of Lagado are fictional, but they seem to meet all the criteria necessary for being representations. By his own account, Dickens intended to represent Leigh Hunt in the character of Skimpole. Moreover, anyone acquainted with Hunt apparently had little difficulty recognising Skimpole as a representation of Hunt. Readers clearly had Hunt brought to mind by Skimpole. Characters such as Skimpole and things such as the Grand Academy may be called partially fictional. Partially fictional items unquestionably can be representational.

If the sorts of literary representations given in the previous paragraph exhaust the class of literary representations, however, most works of literature are mostly non-representational. In most works of literature, few of the people and objects described are real particulars and few of the fictional items are partially fictional. Most characters and objects in literature are purely fictional, that is, they are not based on some original particular object. Even if partially fictional objects are representations, it is not clear that purely fictional objects are representations. In the cases of most characters and objects in most works of literature, the author does not intend to represent some particular object. Readers of most literary works cannot recognise most of the people and things as representing anyone in particular. It seems, then, that the conditions of representation are not met and that representation is not an important part of literature. If so, literature owes little of its value to its capacity to represent. Still, it would be a mistake to accept this conclusion. Even assuming that Austen had no one in particular in mind when she created Mr Collins, the descriptions of that worthy clergyman should be regarded as representational. More generally, literary works which are not primarily concerned with the representation of identifiable real particular objects can be representational.

The suggestion that passages dealing with, for example, Mr Collins are not representational does not accord with most people's experience of literature. It is very common for readers to experience some purely

fictional characters and objects as lifelike, while other such items strike readers as artificial and contrived. If we accept that passages dealing with purely fictional characters represent nothing, it follows that no passage describing purely fictional characters is more representational than any other. A character such as Mr Collins is the product of keen observation of social dynamics and insight into human nature. He is drawn with sensitivity and verisimilitude. On the other hand, we have characters from a bodice-ripper, say a dissolute and withdrawn but wise and warm-hearted viscount who reforms his life and gives up his title to marry a shy, poetic factory girl, who has a degree in archaeology. Such a character is not the product of careful observation of anything. Nevertheless, on the view that we are considering, Austen's descriptions of Mr Collins are no more representational than a passage from a trashy romance. This does not seem right. I submit that there is a sense in which Austen has succeeded in representing something, but the author of the bodice-ripper has not.

The impression that some passages dealing with purely fictional characters are representational is reinforced by reflection on another feature of the experience of literature. It is common for readers of literature to recognise features of themselves, or of other people, in purely fictional characters. The toadying behaviour of Mr Collins may, for example, remind a reader of his own behaviour, when he was a young graduate student at a philosophy conference. On the other hand, no one is likely to be reminded of anything real in reading, in the trashy romance, about the former viscount who marries the factory girl. The best explanation of this difference between the experience of reading *Pride and Prejudice* and reading the bodice-ripper is that the former represents types of objects with actual instances, while the latter does not. In this context it is worth remembering that Trollope aimed to teach 'by representing to [his] readers characters like themselves, or which they might liken to themselves'.⁷ Readers are not only reminded of people. They can also be reminded of things. For example, it is virtually impossible for anyone with the least knowledge of nineteenth-century Britain to read (in *Hard Times*) about Coketown without being reminded of real industrial towns.

If we accept that Austen's purely fictional objects (and those in similar works of literature) are representational, we have to say what they represent. The descriptions of Mr Collins cannot represent Mr Collins, since he does not exist and non-existent objects cannot be represented. Fortunately, something can be a representation without being a representation of a particular object. A representation can be a

representation of a type of objects or (as nominalists would prefer to say) a class of objects. This point was made in almost the earliest set of reflections on representation in literature, the *Poetics*, where Aristotle wrote that 'poetry is something more philosophic and of more serious import than history; for poetry tends to deal with the general, while history is concerned with delimited particular facts'.⁸ If Aristotle is right, purely fictional items in all of literature (and not just poetry) can represent types or classes of objects. (For the sake of convenience and without any intention of stepping on nominalist toes, I will speak of the representation of types of objects.)

Before considering how literature can represent types of objects, a few general remarks on the representation of types is in order. There is nothing very mysterious about such representation. An illustration of a wombat in an encyclopedia article on wombats may be a drawing of some particular wombat. Whether or not the illustration is a portrait of some particular marsupial, however, it does not stand for only one wombat. Rather, it is a representation of a type of animal. Similarly, a statue of a soldier atop a World War I memorial is not (or not only: it could be a portrait) a representation of some particular soldier. It is also a representation of a type: the soldier who fought and died in the trenches, say. In these cases, the creator of the representation intends to represent not just some individual animal or person. Moreover, audiences do not believe that such representations are representations of some individual thing. Readers of the encyclopedia, for example, do not think that the drawing of the wombat is a drawing of some particular animal. Rather, they see it as standing for all wombats.

A similar sort of representation of types is possible in literature. Austen's descriptions of Mr Collins are representations of a class of person: the self-important, pompous and obsequious toady. It is difficult to be sure what Austen intended to do in creating the character of Mr Collins, but it is fair to assume that authors commonly intend to represent a type. Certainly many readers recognise Mr Collins as standing for a familiar type. Similarly, Dickens's descriptions of Coketown represent a type of town produced by the industrial revolution. In this case it is clear that Dickens intended Coketown to stand for such towns and *Hard Times* brings to the mind of (minimally informed) readers just such towns.

It is interesting to note that even real or partially fictional items are often representations of a type, even if they are also representations of individual things. Skimpole, for example, is a representation of Leigh Hunt but at the same time he is a representation of persons of the same

type: lazy people who affect an unworldliness, but live comfortably at the expense of others. Similarly, Napoleon in *War and Peace* can be a representation of a certain sort of heroic individual and a real place can stand for, say, all large, alienating cities.

The view that literature can represent types of objects is able to do justice to both of the features of the experience of literature that make us uneasy about the suggestion that most literature represents nothing. For a start, it becomes possible to explain why readers think that *Pride and Prejudice* is representational, but our imaginary romance is not. The character from our imaginary bodice-ripper cannot represent because there is nothing for it to represent. There is no such real, particular person as the formerly-dissolute viscount who gives up his title and marries the factory girl and there is no instance of the type either. On the other hand, the descriptions of Mr Collins can be representational because there is a type of character, one readers are familiar with, similar to Mr Collins. Moreover, a reader can be reminded of his behaviour at some long ago conference because his behaviour was the type of behaviour displayed by Mr Collins in the presence of Lady Catherine.⁹

At this point it might be objected that descriptions of purely fictional entities are representational in one sense but not representational in another, fuller sense. Nelson Goodman has distinguished between the sort of representation found in a picture of a real person (Jane Austen, say) and the sort of representation found in a picture of a fictional character, such as Mr Collins.¹⁰ The portrait of Austen involves a relation between two objects: the picture and the object represented. The picture of Mr Collins does not involve such a relation. Mr Collins does not exist and the picture cannot, therefore, stand in the same relation to him as the portrait of Austen stands in to her. In Goodman's terminology, the picture of Mr Collins is a Mr Collins-representation, not a representation of Mr Collins. This distinction is applied to literary representation by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen. They accept that literature can represent types, but they maintain that such representations are non-relational. That is, Lamarque and Olsen claim, representations of types are like pictures of Mr Collins.

According to the definition of representation adopted above, all representation is representation of something. Representation so characterised is always relational and 'non-relational representation' is an oxymoron. Consequently, Goodman's characterisation of the picture of Mr Collins (a picture of nothing) as in any sense a representation is misleading. A similar sort of problem is involved

when Lamarque and Olsen allow that literature involves the representation of types, but maintain that such representations are non-relational. On their view, we find in literature what we might call (following Goodman) type-representations, not representations of types. In adopting this position, Lamarque and Olsen are really just saying that literature does not represent types. If they are right, much of literature is non-representational, at least in the sense in which 'representation' is understood in this essay. Consequently, it is necessary to provide some reason for thinking that we find in literature real representations of types.

It is difficult to see what motivates Lamarque and Olsen since it is easy to show that literature, even literature which involves purely fictional entities, can contain full-fledged, relational representations and not mere type-representations. Non-relational (pseudo-)representation of the sort Goodman discusses is only an issue when there is nothing to represent. The picture of Mr Collins is not a representation of Mr Collins because he does not exist. As a result, the picture is merely a Mr Collins-representation (which is no representation at all, on my definition of representation). No such problem arises in the case of the representation of types since types, or classes, of objects really exist. For example, there is a class of pompous toadies. Since this class exists, something can stand for or be a (relational) representation of them, so long as the recognition and intentionality conditions are met. We have already seen that such representation is more than possible and that purely fictional entities are actually representations of types. It seems then that we have no grounds for scepticism about the claim that literature, even literature which involves purely fictional entities, can be representational. We can begin to address the question of the nature of this representation.

III

As noted above, representations come in a variety of forms. A common way to slice up the class of representations divides its members into pictorial representations, on the one hand, and descriptions or linguistic representations, on the other. When representations are divided up in this way, photographs, representational paintings and some sculptures belong to one sub-set. Scientific theories and historical descriptions belong to the other sub-set. This leaves the question of where literary representations fit in and it may seem that they are in the same sub-set as the representations found in history and science. After all, science,

history and literature all employ language, and one might reasonably think that they represent in much the same way. Anyone who thinks this way is, however, mistaken. We need a taxonomy of representations which indicates that those in literature are akin to those in painting and photography.

In order to understand how literature represents, we need to distinguish between *semantic representations* and *illustrative representations* (or *illustrations*). This distinction is not equivalent to the distinction between pictorial representations and representations which employ language. Language can be used both to assert that something is the case and to illustrate that it is the case. Semantic representations are true statements. Statements represent states of affairs in virtue of standing to them in familiar semantic relations. The component parts of an statement refer to the objects which make up a state of affairs and an statement as a whole is true if and only if a state of affairs is as the statement asserts. An illustration, on the other hand, does not assert that some state of affairs is the case. Rather, it is (in a sense to be explicated) a depiction. Depiction can be pictorial, but it can also be verbal. A few examples will clarify the concepts of semantic representation and illustration.

An ordinary statement such as 'The cat is on the mat' is an example of a semantic representation.¹¹ This sentence can represent the cat on the mat since English-speakers have assigned it and its component words certain uses. Given the way we use our words, 'cat' refers to the cat, 'mat' refers to the mat and 'is on' denotes the relation in which the cat stands to the mat. The sentence as a whole is true in English if and only if a certain state of affairs obtains. If the cat is on the mat, the sentence is true and represents, in virtue of the semantic conventions of English, the cat on the mat. If the cat is not on the mat, the sentence is false and fails to represent an existing state of affairs. More sophisticated examples of semantic representation are typically found in history, philosophy and the sciences. Only semantic representations, sentences which make statements, are properly said to be true. Truth and falsity are not properties of illustrations.

Many photographs and paintings can serve as examples of illustrative representations. An illustration represents by depicting (aspects of) its object. To say that an illustration represents an object by depicting it is to say that the illustration gives an example of some characteristic of the object. A painting by Canaletto, for example, stands for San Marco, in part, because it gives some examples of features of the Venetian cathedral. San Marco is perceived as having

rounded arches and domes, and the painting has curved patches of colour which depict these features of the church. Viewers see the Canaletto as a representation of San Marco because they recognise that the painting and its object resemble each other in a relevant respect. (As we have seen, one of the conditions of something's being a representation is that it be recognisable as a representation.)

It can be objected at this point that, in introducing the concept of illustration, I have simply reintroduced the naive theory that representations imitate or resemble their objects. I am aware, of course, of the controversy surrounding the concept of imitation.¹² In saying that illustration involves depiction, I do not want to suggest that there is no element of convention involved in such representation. At the very least, some selection of the features of an object to be represented is involved. Nor do I claim that an illustration imitates things as they really are. On the contrary, I believe that an illustration depicts features that an object is thought or perceived to have. Nevertheless, I believe, and will for present purposes assume, that it makes sense to talk of a representation resembling something in certain respects. Those who are sceptical about this assumption can still accept some of what I say below, since not all depiction in literature involves resemblance between the text and what is represented.

If we accept the distinction between semantic and illustrative representation, we need to ask which sort of representation is found in literature. As noted above, there is a temptation to think that literary representations are semantic ones. After all, like history and science, literature employs language. This temptation should be resisted. The first indication that literary representations are not semantic representations is that many of the sentences in literature are false and many of the terms employed in literature refer to nothing. For example, most of the sentences in *Pride and Prejudice* are false and 'Elizabeth Bennet', 'Fitzwilliam Darcy', 'Netherfield', and so on have no referents. A sentence is a semantic representation, however, if and only if it is true. If the only type of representation *Pride and Prejudice* could employ were of the semantic variety, we would have to conclude that it does not represent. If there is good reason to suppose that literature represents, it follows that literature employs some form of representation other than semantic representation.

The conclusion of the previous paragraph was a little too hasty. Many writers have argued that, although the sentences which make up a work of literature are false, still the work can be seen as making true statements. Some writers have held that, although false, the sentences

in a novel such as *Pride and Prejudice* imply true statements. One can hold that it implies, for example, that 'First impressions are a poor guide to a person's character' or 'Obsequious toadies are contemptible'. Other writers have maintained that sentences can be literally false, but 'metaphorically true'. Here I do not have the space to rehash the arguments against these two attempts to show that literature makes true assertions.¹³ Suffice it to say that I think that these arguments are decisive and that if literature represents, it does not do so by making true statements. Consequently, I am moved to search for a way in which literature can represent without making true statements.

Even if there is reason to believe that literature does not involve semantic representation, it remains to be shown that it can employ illustration. We can begin to make the case for the literary use of illustration by reflecting that ordinary uses of language afford examples of illustrative representation. I can use language to illustrate, rather than assert, that the Academic Vice-president of a certain university is silly. I can say, for example, 'Our Vice-president has solemnly asserted that students are our clients and our partners. He added that this has something to do with Asia-Pacific initiatives'. It is absurd to suppose that a student (*qua* student) can be *both* the client and partner of his teachers, and not much less silly to suppose that he is either. Moreover, views about students have nothing to do with Asia-Pacific initiatives, whatever they might be. I have not, however, actually asserted that the Vice-president is unintelligent for believing such twaddle. I have not provided a semantic representation of his state of mind. Instead, I have represented his lack of intelligence simply by giving examples of the sorts of things he says.

Instances of illustrative representation identical to the sort found in ordinary conversation are found in literature. Consider a rudimentary work of literature such as Scott Adams' comic strip, *Dilbert*. Adams frequently uses illustration to represent the idiocy of the pointy-haired boss. In one strip, the pointy-haired boss announces at a meeting that, 'Ten of our finest executives got together and created a statement of our core values'. In the next frame, the boss reads from this statement: 'We help the community and the world by producing state-of-the-art business solutions'.¹⁵ The difference between my illustration and Adams' representation of the boss is that I represented a real university administrator, but there is no real pointy-haired boss. Adams can only represent a certain sort of manager, which is certainly what he intends to do. Adams does not assert that people like the pointy-haired boss are silly twits for taking such nonsense seriously. Instead, he uses an

example of the sort of thing such people say to provide an illustrative representation of such people and of their cluelessness.

This example from *Dilbert* of illustrative representation is an example of one of three sorts of depiction which can be found in literature. (These sorts of illustration are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. I do not suggest that these are the only kinds of literary depiction, but they are three of the most important. A work of literature can simultaneously employ all three sorts.) I will refer to this first sort of depiction as *verbal depiction*. In verbal depiction, instances of what sorts of things people say (or think) are used in representing their characters, states of mind or other of their characteristics. The other forms of depiction which I wish to identify are *descriptive* and *formal depiction*. In descriptive depiction, descriptions of an object are used, not to make statements about it, but to represent it by means of examples. An instance of formal depiction uses the formal properties of the literary text to represent some object. The formal properties of the text have some relevant property in common with what is represented. A few examples will make clearer what I mean in talking of these forms of depiction.

More sophisticated examples of verbal depiction than can be culled from *Dilbert* can be found in Dickens. In *Bleak House*, for example, examples of the Reverend Mr Chadband's utterances are used to represent a certain sort of unctuously sanctimonious character. When Mr Chadband, sermonising on the subject of 'Terewth', says (in Chapter 25) 'Say not to me that it is *not* the lamp of lamps. I say to you, it is. I say to you, a million times over, it is. It is. I say to you that I will proclaim it to you, whether you like it or not'. Dickens gives a wonderful representation of a sort of character I can see every Sunday morning on television. In this example, not only what is said, but how it is said determines what is depicted. Notice that Dickens does not assert that people like Mr Chadband are silly and sanctimonious. Instead, examples of their discourse illustrate them in such a way that this is apparent.

A good example of descriptive depiction is found in *Pride and Prejudice*. Nowhere in the novel does Austen make assertions about the character of men like Wickham. Nevertheless, this type of character is plainly represented. One technique Austen uses is giving descriptions of the sort of actions people like Wickham perform. Descriptions can be used to make statements, but they can also be used to give examples. In *Pride and Prejudice* we are given, for example, descriptions of Wickham's over-familiarity on first meeting Elizabeth, his avoidance

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of the ball at Netherfield, his courtship of Mary King, and so on. These descriptions are not being used to make assertions (they are, after all, not intended to be taken as true.) Rather the descriptions are used to give examples of the behaviour of a certain sort of man. These examples represent an unprincipled and selfish character and represent it as bad.

Formal depiction involves a resemblance between formal characteristics of a text (often a poetical text) and the object being represented. Good examples of such depiction are found in Shakespeare's Sonnet CXXIX. In this sonnet, Shakespeare represents impetuous lust and the effect of such an emotion on the mind. The lines of the sonnet are impulsive, rude and fractured:

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust.

The thoughts of a person in the grip of lust are similarly impulsive and rude. A few lines later, the repeated h's, especially in line 10, ('Had, having, and in quest to have, ... ') make the poem resemble panting. On the face of it, this poem is a series of statements, but the semantic properties of the poem are incidental to its capacity to represent a particular state of mind. Instead, examples of certain characteristics and sounds are used as illustrations.

This last example indicates that even when the sentences which make up a work of literature are true, they are not (or not only) semantic representations. A clearer example is provided by the opening sentence of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur ...

This sentence is probably true (apart from the bit about mountains). Five years did elapse between the time Wordsworth last visited the area which he describes and when he wrote this sentence. He did hear the Wye murmur as its waters rolled from their springs. As a true sentence, the sentence is a semantic representation. It does not follow, however, that the passages which contain these sentences are simply semantic representations. True sentences can also be part of an illustration. In the sentence in question and the succeeding ones, Wordsworth is not simply making statements. Rather, he is illustrating

his feelings about a particular sort of country and representing a perspective on the natural world. The sentences illustrate a certain perspective on nature. The fact that the sentences are true is irrelevant since even if every sentence in the poem were false, if Wordsworth were mistaken about where he was or when he was last there, even if Wordsworth had created an imaginary river valley, the poem would still be an illustrative representation.

It is true that, in some cases, the truth of sentences in a work of literature has an effect on the work *qua* illustrative representation. *Moby Dick*, for example, even apart from the chapters which are effectively essays on the whaling trade, contains many true sentences about the equipment and practices of whaling ships. I assume it is (or was) true that 'When in the Southern Fishery, a captured Sperm Whale, after long and weary toil, is brought alongside late at night, it is not, as a general thing at least, customary to proceed at once to the business of cutting him in' (Chapter LXV). Similarly, in *Anna of the Five Towns* we find true sentences about the production of pottery. The use of true sentences in these novels is simply a matter of style. True sentences can give a work an air of verisimilitude and they are often used in realist novels as means of enhancing a descriptive depiction. Realism is, however, simply one technique that can be used in literary representation. A work of science fiction or fantasy without a single remotely true sentence can still represent, so long as the three conditions identified in Section I are met.

The use of true sentences can have an impact on what is represented in a work of literature. Consider the use of true sentences in the context of verbal depiction. Having a character utter a number of true sentences can contribute to the fact that a trustworthy, insightful or veracious character is represented. (On the other hand, a character who utters falsehoods is represented in quite another light.) Nevertheless, passages where true sentences are used in this manner are still instances of illustration.

IV

One advantage of the present approach to representation in literature is that it makes it possible to explain why preachy, didactic works of literature are not usually any good. A novel (Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* is a good or, rather, bad example) which contains little but statements—and thinly disguised statements—does not take advantage of the mode of representation (illustration) most effectively employed

by literature. Bare statements are of little (cognitive) value unless they are true and some reasons are given for believing them. In order to be a source of knowledge, statements need to be marshalled into arguments for conclusions, as they are in history, philosophy, the sciences and other disciplines. The best novels are likely to be those characterised by the effective use of illustrative representation. (In this context, 'the best' may turn out to be relative to an audience.)

Scepticism about the claim that literature involves the assertion of truths is often the basis for doubt about the cognitive value of literature. This essay makes clear that if one wants to establish that literature has no cognitive value, it is not sufficient to argue that it makes no true statements. Even if literature does not assert truths, it can still reveal them. The case for the claim that literature involves illustrative representation is the beginning of a case for the view that literature can be a source of knowledge.

As noted at the outset, this essay is merely a prolegomena to a full defence of the cognitive status of literature. Here I have simply shown that literature can represent the world and given some indication of the ways in which it represents. Once it is established that literature involves illustrative representation (and not the semantic representation characteristic of, for example, history and science) a great deal remains to be said about literary representation. In particular, it remains to be seen how literary representations can be a source of knowledge and understanding.¹⁶ Only when this further step is taken do we have the basis of a reply to those sceptical about the value, particularly the cognitive value, of literature.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 For a particularly forceful attempt, see Richard Gaskin, *Critical Notice of Truth, Fiction, and Literature* by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 395–401.
- 2 'Representation' does not appear, for example, in the indexes of Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature*, Cambridge, 1989 and of David Novitz, *Truth, Fiction, and Knowledge*, Philadelphia, 1987. The concept of representation is given short shrift in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, Oxford, 1994. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, is a notable treatment of mimesis in the arts in general, but it does not really treat representation in the sense in which the term is used in this essay.
- 3 Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. van Dorsten, Oxford, 1966, p. 25.

- 4 Torquato Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel, Oxford, 1973, p.10.
- 5 Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 7, ed. Arthur Sherbo, New Haven, 1968, p.62.
- 6 Cited in Francis Sparshott, 'Truth in Fiction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 26 (1967): 3-4.
- 7 Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, London, 1950, p.146.
- 8 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Preston H. Epps, Chapel Hill, 1942, p.18 (1451 b).
- 9 This conclusion needs to be qualified somewhat since representation admits of degrees (unlike, perhaps, truth). A bad representation is still a representation. A character from the trashy romance may very well be a representation of a certain type of object (young women who work in factories, perhaps). It is simply a really bad representation.
- 10 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Indianapolis, 1976, pp.21ff.
- 11 Lamarque and Olsen, pp.313ff.
- 12 I am assuming that this sentence is being used in a non-literary context. There is no reason why this sentence cannot be part of work of literature and part of an illustrative representation.
- 13 Goodman, *Languages of Art*, and E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Oxford, 1983 are the principle sources of the challenge to the concept of representation. See Crispin Sartwell, 'Representation', in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David E. Cooper, Oxford, 1992, p.368, for a sketch of a defence of the claim that representation can involve imitation.
- 14 For the first defence of the claim that literature makes assertions, see Morris Weitz, 'Truth in Literature', *Revue internationale de philosophie* 9 (1955): 116-29; reprinted in *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*, ed. John Hospers, New York, 1969, pp.213-24. For the view that sentences can be metaphorically true even when literally false, see Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, 1978, pp.102ff. For the case against these views, see Lamarque and Olsen, chapters 13 and 14.
- 15 Scott Adams, *Dilbert*, 17 July 1997.
- 16 Elsewhere I have contributed to the effort to show how the sorts of representations found in the arts can have cognitive value. 'Inquiry in the Arts and Science', *Philosophy* 71 (1996): 255-73, is a programmatic work which sketches an account of the means by which the arts contribute to knowledge, and how these means differ from those employed in the sciences.
- 17 An anonymous referee for this journal provided helpful comments on this essay. I am also grateful to Peter Lamarque for useful criticisms of an earlier version of this paper.