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*The Philosophical Readings  
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Edited by  
Marco Piazza and Denise Vincenti

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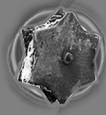
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# Philosophy in Literature

## A Strategic Approach to the Debate on Philosophy and Literature

Marco Piazza and Denise Vincenti<sup>1</sup>

From Kant to the present, in different and divergent ways, philosophy and literature become inextricably intertwined precisely through their radical separation.

Colebrook 2019, p. 13

### 1. Philosophy *of* literature, philosophy *and* literature, philosophy *in* literature

In the last two decades, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and literature has engendered a multitude of approaches, which outline, especially within the Anglo-American debate, a fairly clear picture and an embryonic form of canonisation. On the European side, the lively debate on the indistinctness of philosophy and literature<sup>2</sup>, which arose during the 1980s, was followed by a relatively stable phase, arguably caused by the passing of some of its chief representatives (Derrida, Rorty). Likewise in Italy, except for some attempts to define

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<sup>1</sup> Section 1 is to be ascribed to Marco Piazza, whereas section 2 to Denise Vincenti.

<sup>2</sup> Piazza (2013).

the problem through the theoretical and methodological perspectives of Ontological realism – according to which literature is nothing but a subset of the macro-object ‘artwork’<sup>3</sup> –, no relevant changes can be detected. Ontological realism is in fact just one of the many lines of inquiry pursued at international level, namely the one traditionally labelled as *philosophy of literature*<sup>4</sup>. Yet, new studies and research have recently caught on in the Anglo-American *milieu*, thereby redefining the debate on the complex relationship between philosophy and literature. In this area, we witness for instance various efforts at combining disparate approaches. Although these new directions have the advantage of delivering increasingly accurate overviews on the state-of-the-art of the debate, they do not always rely on a sound methodology. Indeed, they are sometimes limited to gathering contributions from different fields, as in the case of the collective volume edited by John & McIver Lopes (2003), or to advocating a brotherhood between different perspectives, to be pursued both by literary theorists working in literary studies, and by philosophers dealing with the philosophy-literature nexus<sup>5</sup>.

The problem of the relationship between philosophy and literature is indeed quite intricate with regard to its theoretical and epistemological foundations. Firstly because of the difficulty in defining the two objects ‘philosophy’ and ‘literature’, concei-

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<sup>3</sup> Barbero (2013).

<sup>4</sup> This position can nonetheless boast a more perspicuous and well-defined project compared to the others.

<sup>5</sup> Selleri & Gaydon (2016): *Introduction*.



ved sometimes as disciplines, cultural products or relatively autonomous activities, placed on an equal footing from a taxonomic viewpoint; sometimes as subspecies one of the other, especially if we consider philosophy as a form of literature – as scholarship has done, also in the wake of Richard Rorty’s positions<sup>6</sup>. Certainly, it is possible to detect the core of their difference by showing how philosophy could also be a form of life and how it could connect to some non-linguistic practices<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, we should hardly neglect the fact that this form of life needs to translate in some forms of writing, in other words that it needs to acquire a literary form<sup>8</sup>. Another critical point is that the cultural object ‘literature’ appears to be younger than the cultural object ‘philosophy’<sup>9</sup>, although it is possible to backdate its birth by considering it in continuity with the cultural object ‘poetry’<sup>10</sup>.

Undoubtedly, if we aprioristically assume that philosophy and literature have different purviews and domains, it is tempting to embrace Ontological realism, which postulates literature as a subset of the macro-object ‘artwork’. On this basis, philosophy, conceived as a non-artistic practice, acquires the full right to reduce this subset to its own subject of study, thereby giving birth to a branch of aesthetics named ‘philosophy of literature’ (objective possessive case). As a matter of fact, such a position

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6 Rorty (1978); cf. Shusterman (2010), p. 7.

7 Shusterman (2010), p. 9.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 11.

9 Ribard (2000).

10 Piazza (2013), pp. 39-40.

does nothing other than reaffirm, centuries later, Plato's and Aristotle's gesture – the former initiating 'ontology of literature', the latter 'philosophy of literature' itself, of which he would be the full-fledged father<sup>11</sup>. Albeit quite elegant from a syllogistic viewpoint, this position is not completely satisfying. What is missing is indeed the awareness, reached in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the absence of a clear demarcation line between philosophy and literature, and of the importance of the (problem of) style in philosophy<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, it seems not to acknowledge a. the existence of a philosophical literature (namely a literary theory which deals with the literary object 'philosophy')<sup>13</sup>, and b. its relationship with philosophy of literature (objective possessive case) and, more in general, with aesthetics<sup>14</sup>. Although, according to some scholars, *literature theory* – taught within the Departments of literary studies, and focused on comparative literature and on so-called Cultural Studies – and *philosophy of literature* – taught within the Departments of philosophy and especially by those who deal with literary aesthetic – are two indistinguishable fields<sup>15</sup>, if we consider this relationship from a hermeneutic viewpoint, the problem becomes complicated and broadens.

First of all, the hermeneutic perspective, attentive to the challenges issued from the debate on

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11 Carroll & Gibson (2015), p. xxi; on Aristotle cf. also Lamarque (2009), p. 1.

12 Frank (1992).

13 This position can be conceived for instance as an inquiry on the literary genres employed by philosophy.

14 D'Angelo (ed. 2012).

15 Carroll & Gibson (2015), pp. xxi-xiii.

the indistinctiveness of philosophy and literature, can easily claim the irreducibility of literature to a philosophical subject, on the basis that philosophy has meditated on the problem of its expression and style from the very beginning. To acknowledge the epistemological and methodological complexity of the problem of style in philosophy does not mean reducing this very discipline to a literary genre – an outcome, by the way, that seems to be opposite to that reached by Ontological realism. On the contrary, it means postulating the impossibility for philosophy of looking at literature as a mere otherness, and rewriting/rethinking their long history of mutual demarcations (most of them successful, albeit rarely persuasive, especially if we consider them through the lenses of Nietzsche's, Wittgenstein's or Derrida's reflections<sup>16</sup>). Otherwise said, if we do not consider philosophy and literature as two independent fields and, consequently, philosophy as a discipline which should reduce literature to one of its objects, it is possible to embrace the idea that philosophy and literature are two writing practices which evolved over the centuries and gave rise to different canons, having manifold points of intersection in terms of literary genres and styles. These points of convergence can be investigated and analysed through the theoretical and methodological tools of both fields, without succumb to the temptation of considering them the exclusive prerogative of only one discipline<sup>17</sup>.

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16 See Benjamin (1994); (1998).

17 Piazza (2013), p. 41.

The widespread contraposition between a philosophy drawing ideal and abstract theorisations and a literature focusing on the particular in the universal<sup>18</sup> is nothing but a cultural product. Rather, it is the very basis on which the long narrative of these two disciplines and of their opposition has been grounded. Even if it is undeniable that these two fields respectively show a different ratio of reason and imagination, universal and particular, detached perspective and involved perspective, this specificity does not entail an ontological difference between philosophy and literature, originating rather from their longstanding strategic efforts at putting a demarcation line between themselves. These efforts have ancient roots, but they do not deliver on what they promise, namely the pureness of the two fields and their perfect differentiation<sup>19</sup>. Although this perspective is not upheld by all scholars, it is widely accepted that this dialectic leads philosophy and literature to correct their assumptions by recurring one to the other<sup>20</sup>. On this basis, it is possible to explain the philosophical recourse to literary genres (including genres linked to poetry and drama, such as poem, dialogue, narrative, diary, etc.), at the expense of those genres traditionally associated with philosophy since more suitable to the rigour of its speculation (treatise, essay, dissertation, etc.). Stocker uses the term ‘philosophy as literature’ to indicate that line of in-

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18 A contraposition which associates the faculty of reason with philosophy and the faculty of imagination with literature, also opposing philosophical detachment to literary-poetical involvement. See Eldridge (2009), p. 5.

19 Piazza (2013), p. 39.

20 Eldridge (2009), p. 4.

quiry focusing on “the way philosophy can appear in the main literary genres” and including the “discussion of the genres”, in the sense that “philosophical discussion of the genres and the philosophical use of genres” would be “interactive processes”<sup>21</sup>. Philosophy is therefore written through literary genres, from dialogue to essay, from poem to autobiography, from biography to aphorism, from fragment to diary, from novel to tale, to name but a few<sup>22</sup>.

The idea is thus catching on that ‘philosophy of literature’ should be complemented by ‘philosophy and literature’, conceived by some scholars as ‘philosophy in literature’<sup>23</sup>. According to Carroll and Gibson “the study of philosophy *in* literature differs from philosophy *of* literature in that the former typically takes as its object a *particular* work, or genre or author, while the philosophy *of* literature takes all literature or great swathes of it in its purview, examining it in terms of the animating questions of metaphysics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, ethics, political theory, and aesthetics”<sup>24</sup>. On his side, Lamarque distinguishes three levels in the study of philosophy and literature: a. the identification of a philosophical meaning in a literary work, made by literary critics and without recourse to philosophical tools; b1. a philosophical inquiry into a literary text written by a philosopher, made through a comparison

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21 Stocker (2018), p. 2.

22 Eldridge (2009), *part I. Genres*; D’Angelo (ed. 2012).

23 Carroll & Gibson (2015), p. xxii. This classification recalls the distinction between ‘philosophy of literature’ and ‘philosophy in literature’ postulated by Lamarque (2009), pp. 3–4.

24 *Ibidem*.

with their philosophical works and around a shared philosophical topic; b2. a philosophical inquiry into a literary text, conceived as a philosophical work (a sort of incorporation of literature into philosophy); and c. the use of fictional works to expand or develop philosophical ideas<sup>25</sup>. For Lamarque, it is in this third level that “philosophy in literature intersects with philosophy of literature”, since both rely on some pivotal questions: whether and how fiction could support truth; whether and how literature, in addition to “giving pleasure”, could teach us something<sup>26</sup>.

It is precisely in the name of a wider approach to the question of the relationship between philosophy and literature that we have conceived the call for papers at the basis of this special issue. Our aim was indeed to deliver an overview, which did not limit itself to the narrow borders of ‘philosophy of literature’, but enhanced the entire ambit of ‘philosophy in literature’, also trying to preserve the latter from the deconstructionist deviations which penalised it from the 1980s to the 2000s. Before introducing the papers featured in this issue, it is worth recalling, through some examples, the main models adopted by ‘philosophy of literature’ and ‘philosophy and literature’.

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<sup>25</sup> Lamarque (2009), pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

## 2. New trends and directions in ‘philosophy and literature’ and ‘philosophy of literature’

Following the cultural, institutional, and theoretical changes of the late twentieth century, the contemporary debate on the relationship between philosophy and literature has taken on different forms and features. New approaches and ways of defining the interactions between the two fields have indeed arisen in recent decades, mirroring the complexity of the previous discussions on post-modernism, deconstructionism, literary theory, aesthetics, etc., and as a response to the fragmentation engendered by these positions. Although a certain fragmentation is still present today – translating in a multitude of methodologies and theories –, some attempts to merge different approaches have started informing more recent studies on the subject.

To depict what we could define the ‘state-of-the-art’ of contemporary studies on philosophy and literature is not a straightforward task, nor is it exempt from pitfalls. Firstly, as mentioned, because of the shifting nature of such a debate and the corresponding efforts at combining different and sometimes opposite perspectives. Secondly, and above all, because of the absence of a clear-cut demarcation line between methodologies, approaches and theoretical views. This second feature is probably the most noticeable and puzzling one, since it prevents us from consistently labelling each and every perspective. Indeed, it may happen that a particular analysis of the philosophy-literature nexus could fall into diffe-

rent labels, or display a mixed methodology, which complicates our understanding of its positioning. On the other hand, this interconnection between disciplinary approaches and methods is the actual richness of these kinds of studies, one that is increasingly chased and encouraged by the latest essay collections from both fields. Due to this complexity, no attempt to draw a thorough and exhaustive picture of the contemporary debate would be satisfactory. Yet, to present its overall 'geography', by illustrating the main models it is composed of, could at least shed light on it.

Generally speaking, one criterion for defining the physiognomy of such a debate consists of understanding how scholars conceive the connection between philosophy and literature. Different forms of connection indeed entail as many different perspectives and ways of exploring this peculiar relationship. As recalled in the first section, the manifold lines of inquiry on this nexus could be ideally grouped in two main categories: 'philosophy and literature' and 'philosophy of literature'. Now, these two labels undoubtedly have several points of intersection. But they also present some specificities, in terms of models and methodologies, on which we now intend to focus.

As far as philosophy and literature is concerned, we should acknowledge that the kind of approach varies depending on the meaning assigned to the word 'and'. Does the 'and' indicate a simple comparison, or a form of interaction? Is it inclusive, or exclusive? Eldridge, for instance, takes the 'and' seriously,



claiming that the study of philosophy *and* literature is not reducible to philosophy *of* literature or to philosophy *in* literature. The aim is to analyse the “relations of complementarity and opposition” between the two, and not to reveal philosophical problems hidden within literary works. Indeed, according to him, these models (i.e. philosophy of literature and philosophy in literature) tend to disregard “the powers and interest of literature”, as well as the “uneasy affinities and disaffinities between the two” as cultural practices<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, the ‘and’ introduces the possibility of looking at life from different perspectives (literary, philosophical), which have the same right to speak on a specific topic, but which adopt different, and even irreducible viewpoints<sup>2</sup>. At other times, instead, the ‘and’ becomes a way of combining philosophy and literature in the name of interdisciplinarity<sup>3</sup>. In Anglophone academia, this model has gained remarkable consensus over the years<sup>4</sup>. The Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature, founded in 1985 at the University of Warwick, stands as one of the first expressions of this trend and as its most fertile cradle<sup>5</sup>. The search for a syncretistic and interdisciplinary approach is today at the basis of several journals, like “Philosophy and Literature” and “New Literary History”, studies<sup>6</sup>, essay collections<sup>7</sup> and local initiatives. The idea is not

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1 Eldridge (2009), p. 13.

2 *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

3 For a definition of this term, see Selleri & Gaydon (2016), pp. 5 ff.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 2.

5 Piazza (2003), p. 11; Warner (2010), p. 121.

6 Gorman (1999); Currie (2010); Eagleton (2012); Cascardi (2014).

7 John & McIver Lopes (eds 2003); Rudrum (ed. 2006); Hagberg & Jost (eds 2010);

to simply compare these two practices, but to foster their brotherhood and define a new way of thinking, also able to respond to the new challenges brought about by technological progress, politics, post-humanism, bioethics, etc.<sup>8</sup>.

Under the wide label ‘philosophy and literature’, another model to be included is ‘philosophy in literature’ – despite some scholars’ reluctance about such an inclusion<sup>9</sup>. From a general standpoint, this category embraces all those positions which aim to detect philosophical themes in literary works. Nevertheless, this search for philosophical ideas takes on different meanings, depending on the perspective adopted by scholars. We could, in fact, discern at least three conceptions of philosophy in literature: a. an analysis of literary works, conceived as instances of philosophical stances – that is the case, for example, of considering Sartre’s *Nausea* as an illustration of *Being and Nothingness*<sup>10</sup>. This sense of philosophy in literature overlaps the second definition given by Lamarque to ‘philosophy and literature’<sup>11</sup>; b. a study of the philosophical references in literary texts (e.g. explicit references to a philosopher, current of thought or philosophical tradition). Such a position consists of examining the cultural references of a writer and the influences exercised by philosophical concepts, ideas and theorisations on literary works, by relying especially on the historical method. The main issue

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Schroeder (ed. 2010); Selleri & Gaydon (eds 2016); Stocker & Mack (eds. 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Rudrum, Askin, Beckman (eds. 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Eldridge (2009), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Lamarque (2009), pp. 3-4.

of this approach is that it can lead to an extrinsic comparison between philosophy and literature; c. an inquiry into the cultural references of a literary text from a theoretical viewpoint<sup>12</sup>. The aim of this model is to present these references as theoretical devices, able to engender actual philosophical stances. In this case, philosophical positions display a poetical function, in terms of characterisation of the characters and narrative development. An extreme case of this process is the thesis novel, where philosophical intentions prevail over literary contents<sup>13</sup>.

Philosophy in literature is thus an important part of philosophy and literature, one that examines the presence of philosophical positions in literary texts. Yet, its three main approaches also intersect with a specific form of philosophy *of* literature. Before addressing this convergence, it is worth analysing what is meant by ‘philosophy of literature’ and exploring its main directions. ‘Philosophy of literature’ is quite a broad category, which encompasses the most heterogeneous and disparate positions. Its very definition is further complicated by the fact that the possessive case can be both objective (opc) and subjective (spc): whereas, in the first case, the stress is on the word ‘philosophy’, in the second one, the focus is on literature, and on its possibility of providing philosophical insights<sup>14</sup>. As far as the first definition is concerned, philosophy of literature (opc) corresponds to a study conceiving literature as part

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<sup>12</sup> Piazza (2013), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Macherey (1992); Dumoulié (2002), pp. 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> Piazza (2013), p. 45.

of the philosophical speech and as one of its main objects. In this sense, philosophy of literature partially overlaps with philosophical aesthetics. Within this general trend, nevertheless, a distinction has to be made between those positions which adopt the methodology of Analytical philosophy, and those which can be aligned with Continental philosophy<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the Analytical approach deals with general questions related to or raised by literature, such as defining the art object, defining the location of aesthetic qualities, defining aesthetic appreciation as more cognitive or emotive, etc.<sup>16</sup> This position also embraces reflections on epistemology and ontology of literature, with specific attention to the truth-fiction nexus, as well as the question of language and style<sup>17</sup>. The Continental approach, focusing more on the actual dialogue between philosophy and literature, is in turn composed of multiple interpretative trends. Although deconstructionism has been a major model for this approach since the 1970s, the bankruptcy of this very position (and of its simplistic drift toward the indistinctiveness of philosophy and literature) has paved the way for other perspectives, such as hermeneutics and phenomenology<sup>18</sup>.

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15 Stocker (2018), p. 15.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 17.

17 Examples of this approach are: New (1999); Zamir (2002); Davis & Matheson (eds 2008); Barbero (2013); Callus, Corby, Lauri-Lucente (eds 2013).

18 See Stocker (2018). It has to be noted that, while in the 1980s philosophy departments barred their doors to deconstructionists, those of literature started aligning with this very position: this encounter marks the birth of the so-called 'literature theory', namely a theoretical reflection on literature pursued by literary theorists and integrated by comparative literature and Cultural studies (Rudrum [ed. 2006], p. 3). Its belonging to philosophy of literature is still a subject of discussion.

A different way of looking at philosophy of literature is to consider the possessive case as subjective. In this respect, philosophy of literature amounts to a study of the presence of philosophical stances in literary works. This interpretative model has something to do with the three approaches of ‘philosophy in literature’ mentioned above. It is indeed possible to investigate philosophical ideas in literature by considering writers’ references to philosophers, or by wondering whether these references might be at the origin of certain literary conceptions. Yet, philosophy of literature (spc) is not limited to that. This position also deals with the philosophy engendered by literature, namely with the original and profound insights provided by writers. According to Sabot, this inquiry can be pursued in two ways: a. through a *didactic scheme*, for which literary texts do not autonomously produce philosophical stances, being rather subordinated to a philosophical project that precedes and determines them; and b. through a *hermeneutic scheme*, for which literature is able to produce original ideas, inaccessible to philosophy, that nevertheless have to be interpreted by philosophy<sup>19</sup>. Sabot’s classification takes as a reference studies on Proust’s *Recherche* – which seem to be cases in point for this form of philosophy of literature (spc). According to this classification, a didactic scheme would thus consider Proust’s novel as a point of convergence of various philosophical suggestions (Romanticism, dialectic materialism, Bergson’s philosophy, etc.)<sup>20</sup>; whereas

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<sup>19</sup> Sabot (2002), pp. 42–43.

<sup>20</sup> See Henry (1981); (1983); (2000). Today, the most complete and thorough

a hermeneutic scheme would instead highlight the novelty of Proust's thought with regard to some pivotal concepts, such as for instance temporality<sup>21</sup>.

In the light of the intriguing complexity of the contemporary debate, this special issue intends to investigate a specific nexus between philosophy and literature: the philosophical readings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. This line of inquiry ranks at the intersection of philosophy in literature and philosophy of literature (spc), since it merges historical research on the dialogue between writers and philosophers, and theoretical analyses on the 'philosophies' sketched out – almost implicitly – by writers. The objective of this volume is twofold: a. pointing out the influence of philosophical conceptualisations on a specific work or literary corpus; and b. detecting the theoretical sources of a writer, by historically reconstructing his readings, interests and influences. From Fëdor Dostoevskij to W.G. Sebald, passing through Henry James, Maurice Maeterlinck, Miguel de Unamuno, James Joyce, Fernando Pessoa, Guimarães Rosa and Thomas Bernhard, this issue takes into account various writers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, belonging to different countries and displaying different cultural and conceptual models. Although not exhaustive, this overview tries to provide readers with some meaningful examples of how literature has entered into dialogue with philosophy. As we have seen, the question of the respective domains of philosophy and literature is far from

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study on the philosophical influences of Proust's novel is Fraisse (2013).

21 See Ricœur (1984). See also Descombes (1987) and Machery (2013).

being exhaustively settled. And the need to address the problem through a broader and more comprehensive perspective seems to be imperative. Our aim was thus to take part in this debate and hopefully give new strength to it, showing how 'philosophy in literature' could fruitfully interact with 'philosophy of literature'.

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