

ON LITERARY TRUTH

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IN this paper I attempt some elementary clarification of the use of 'true', and related terms, in literary criticism. This use rests on assumptions, and has consequences, which are rarely made explicit and seem at least questionable. My aim is to indicate, by examining these, what sense can be given to the notion of literary truth, i.e. what inferences may, and what may not, properly be drawn from a statement ascribing truth to a work of literature.¹

It is widely assumed that works of literature can be true or false, and that this distinction is not that between works of fact and works of fiction. Thus a fictional work can have literary truth, and a non-fictional work can lack it. This assumption raises obvious problems for any correspondence theory of truth. The present analysis in effect provides inductive support for such a theory by accounting for literary truth in terms of it, and exposing the inadequacy of other, apparently more plausible, accounts. But first, some preliminary remarks need to be made.

Truth is taken to be a valuable quality in a work of literature, although its importance to an overall critical assessment varies. The truth of formal kinds of poetry, for instance, seems to matter relatively little; that of a novel may largely determine its literary value. Hence it is convenient to discuss the question in terms of novels, without implying either that literary truth applies only to novels or that it is the sole criterion of their value. Since I do not wish to restrict the discussion to explicitly fictional works, I shall apply the term 'novel' also to such works as biographies, judged as works of literature and not just as factual records.²

I do not wish to imply that the kinds of problem posed by this concept of truth are peculiar to literature. Analogous problems arise with talk of true or false portraits in painting or sculpture, or of representation in the theatre, opera or ballet. A sense can even be given to such judgments in architecture and music, where these can be said to represent or express something; indeed in any form of art not purely abstract. The analogy with portraits is invoked later, but in general I avoid the wider discussion. Literature uses language to make statements, which can be judged true or false, in a relatively straightforward way. Other arts do not use a language so straightforwardly, so that the sense in which they make statements, true or false, is relatively too obscure for their analogies with literature to be illuminating.

It perhaps needs saying that I am not concerned with which novels are true and which false, given only that there are some of each. Any reference to particular novels is merely illustrative, and if an illustration fails to convince, it may be supposed changed to another, real or imaginary. Now it may be thought that the particular nature of aesthetic experience makes reference to actual works essential to any conceptual investigation of it. This is not so. I am not concerned to analyse the experience given by a particular work of art or literature, but to make general statements, which could be supported by referring to works similar in kind to a particular work. Consequently any argument invokes only a description of the illustrative work as being of that kind. Given that there

1. I am especially indebted for prior discussion and specific criticism to Professor R. B. Braithwaite, Dr M. K. Tanner, Mr G. Holland, and members of the Cambridge Moral Sciences Research Students' Seminar, none of whom is responsible for any fallacies remaining in the paper. Further revision has resulted from subsequent reading of Professor Graham Hough's *An Essay on Criticism* (London, 1966).

² E.g. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. 'Literature', even when apparently defined to exclude non-fiction, is always understood more widely (e.g. Hough, op. cit., §53). So narrow a definition, apart from running clearly counter to usage, obscures the parallel between the conceptual problems posed by true fiction and false non-fiction.

are works of that kind, the existence of the particular work, satisfying a more detailed description than that invoked in the argument, is irrelevant.

The next point is that the truths conveyed by novels are almost invariably about human experience. They may be psychological, of the character, emotions, or reactions to environment of, or of relations between, human individuals. They may be sociological, of the relations between persons and a group or groups of people, or between groups. They may concern the relations of persons or groups of people to non-human entities, such as animals, material objects, real or imagined forms of life. They rarely concern relations between, or properties of, non-human entities, except where these are assigned human qualities which then in fact form the subject of enquiry. It follows from this restriction that a novel may also convey moral or aesthetic truth about its subject matter, and this is often taken to be one of its chief functions. Now this assumes that moral and aesthetic judgments are statements, and not just injunctions that can be obeyed or disobeyed but not regarded as true or false. I shall avoid using this assumption by confining the further discussion to empirical truth (psychological, sociological, etc.) conveyed by novels, again without implying that these are the only, or most important, truths conveyed. If there are moral truths, then what follows applies also to them.

I have observed that truth is taken to be a quality of a novel. By 'novel' I mean not a particular copy or edition, but the common content of all copies or editions of a novel, however produced. Such features as typography, layout of words on a page, illustrations, etc., which vary between copies or editions. may be important to the assessment of certain works, e.g. some poetry, or works of which much of the content is in pictorial form. I simply assume that these features are rarely relevant to a judgment of literary truth, and exclude exceptions from consideration on the grounds already given for excluding the non-literary arts.

Similarly I abstract in general from the language in which a novel is written. I assume that the truth of a novel can survive translation into another language. This is a more doubtful assumption, and needs both qualification and defence. The qualification is for the case in which the truth conveyed is about linguistic experience peculiar to the language in which the novel is written and so tied to its expression in that language that truth-preserving translation is impossible. It is often said that poetry especially is untranslatable for this reason. The ostensible translation of such a work must then be regarded as a distinct work, to avoid the unpleasant possibility that work could be simultaneously true (in an English original) and false (in a French translation). But linguistic experience of this kind, of aural or visual word patterns peculiar to a language, is only a small part of human experience, and the truths conveyed by novels rarely concern it. For example, truths about speech idioms or dialects, that could have no analogues in other languages, are usually at most incidental to a novel. Hence the truth of a novel can usually be conveyed equally well in any one of several languages.

This is not, of course, to claim that all translations are perfect, or that translation is always (or ever) possible into all languages. A bad translation may fail to express truths conveyed by the novel in its original language, and some languages may lack terms in which to express them at all. Moreover, a translation may fail to preserve other valuable (eg. stylistic) features of a novel, so that its overall value is less, even though it conveys the same truth. Such a translation is good enough for the present purpose, and may be counted not as a distinct novel, but as a version of the same novel, on a par with a shoddily printed edition in the same language.

A further common denial of the possibility of truth-preserving translation rests on confusing a language with the society using it. Thus, for example, the sociological assertions of an English novel tend to be judged as true or false of English society. It may be that a true novel of this kind, while perfectly translatable into French, is then less highly regarded because its assertions are false of French society. But if the truth conveyed is of English society, then it remains just as true

expressed in French, although perhaps of less interest to Frenchmen. This point would normally be made by explicit non-fictional references within the novel, for example by setting it in London, and a translation which changed the location to Paris would then be incorrect.³ If, however, the assertions are more general, say about urban life in modern Europe, so that a translator could legitimately replace 'London' by 'Paris' throughout, and yet are false of French society, then they are not made true by being expressed in English, even if English readers are less likely to be aware of their falsity. Thus, whether or not truth conveyed by a novel is generalizable over different language communities has no necessary bearing on whether truth-preserving translations of the novel can exist in those, or any other, languages.

Another consequence of the common assumptions made about literary truth is that expressing faithfully some emotion, conviction, attitude or experience of the author is not what makes a novel true. Such expression may be an important function of a novel, and is clearly of peculiar interest to an author's biographer, but it does not determine the novel's truth or falsity. If it did, establishing literary truth would simply involve biographical investigation of an author to see if his work accurately conveyed what he had felt, thought and seen up to the time of writing. Sincerity and self-awareness would be the only sources of literary truth, and this is clearly false. An author's writing must, of course, draw on his experience (which may include literary experience, of reading other novels), but it does not follow that this is what his work is about. When it is, in the special case of autobiography, then assessing its truth clearly does involve studying the author's life. But allowing for this, and for such research as may be needed to determine what the novel is about (e.g. date of composition), it seems clear that a judgment of the truth of a novel should be impervious to biographical information. To praise an author's insight into, say, human relations, is to say that some truths about them, conveyed in his novels, are both important and unobvious. Now such praise properly rests on the critic's knowledge of human relations, not on his knowledge of the author's convictions on, or experiences of, the subject. It might be that the author seemed otherwise unaware of the truth conveyed by his novel, or that he was exploring its literary possibilities without wishing to assert it, or that he (wrongly) disbelieved it and wrote cynically. None of this information detracts from the truth of the novel, although it may properly affect a judgment of the author.

The distinction just made, between judging an author, and judging his work, needs clarifying and emphasizing because the one, to which biographical information is relevant, is readily confused with the other, to which in general it is not. To judge an author is, roughly, (a) to say what he is capable of writing and (b) to measure his individual novels against this standard. This may be done over his whole career or, where authors are said to develop, over some temporal part of it. The judgment (a) is derived partly from the assessment of his published output over such a period and partly from any biographical information which suggests that his abilities were not fully realized in this output. This assessment of his output (I am here only interested in the assessment of its truth) must evidently, on pain of vicious circularity, be made independently of information about his ability. But once the judgment (a) is made, a critic might choose to express a judgment of a particular novel in terms of how closely it approaches the limits of the author's ability. Thus all statements of the quality of a novel may refer implicitly to its author's ability, so that a novel may be judged more leniently if it is by a minor than if it is by a major author. What appears as a judgment of the novel may therefore also contain an implicit judgment of the author. Hence the biographical information which is relevant to the latter may come to seem relevant to the former.

If the truth conveyed by a novel is not about the author's experience, it might appear plausible to suppose that it is about the reader's experience. This seems to be a consequence of the view that response to literature is essentially personal, in that the novel must be related to the reader's

³ E.g. Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

experience of life, which differs from person to person. Now it may be that such a personal response is necessary to a worthwhile literary experience, but it cannot determine the truth of a novel. For example, a reader may call a novel true because its descriptive passages recall experiences or regenerate emotions which he felt in situations like those described. This indeed expresses a personal response to reading the novel but not just that. An ascription of truth must give the novel credit for producing such a response: it would hardly be warranted by the reader just happening to feel ill as he reads a death-bed episode. Consequently the response must be judged to have been evoked by the reading of the novel, which should therefore similarly affect *any* reader familiar with the kind of situation described. Moreover the novel must be taken to assert that the responses it evokes are appropriate, since the ascription of truth would obviously be withdrawn if they were not, as when a too-lurid description of violence evokes not horror but mirth.

Thus even where the basis is the emotional response of a single reader, to say that a novel is true is to require assent to this judgment from other readers. Where assent is refused, it makes sense to suppose the other reader to be mistaken. Even when personal response, emotional or intellectual, is explicitly appealed to it is always assumed that some people have better responses than others. It always makes sense to say that a reader is unable to perceive, or appreciate, or react to, the truth of a novel, through immaturity, or lack of intelligence, sensitivity or relevant experience. This could not be so if the truth of a novel were not a quality of it but merely a relation in which it stood to an individual reader. To take an extreme case, suppose a person to be confronted with a great novel in a language he does not understand. His personal response, let us suppose, is one of irritation. He will certainly not be able to assent to the truth of the novel, since it will be unable to evoke in him the appropriate emotional and intellectual responses. The fact that the novel conveys no truth to him may be put (albeit misleadingly) by saying that it is not true *for him*. But then this formulation must not be used to deny the novel *has* truth, independent of the reader's response, which because of his linguistic inadequacy, he simply fails to perceive.

To say that a reader's response cannot be the measure of a novel's literary truth is not to deny its importance. It can have, moreover, a closer connection with literary truth than can the experience of the author in writing it. Reading a novel can involve the experience of discovering new truth as the experience of writing an already conceived work presumably cannot. No doubt, reading, like writing, may be valued for many reasons unrelated to the truth of the novel read. For some, the experience of reading is in itself pleasant, or at least serves to pass time. Then reading a novel may generate emotions, such as pleasure, desire, fear, anger, and be relished for that sake. Again, there may be a visual satisfaction in reading a well-designed copy of a novel. But beyond all this, a novel may be valued because it informs the reader about human experience. It supplements and recalls the knowledge gained directly from his own fragmentary experience and, by conversation, from that of others. A novel may thus be less valuable to a reader who already knows what the novel conveys than to one who does not. Thus their personal responses to the truth of the novel may differ even where both agree on the truth conveyed and on the value of the other elements in the experience of reading it. The connection between personal response to a novel and its truth may therefore be, roughly, that a reader values a novel more highly if it conveys to him important truths with which he was previously unacquainted. For this it is clearly necessary and not sufficient that the novel convey truth. The personal element here can be accounted for by invoking the reader's previous knowledge: it need not be brought into the assessment of the novel's truth.

Of this speculation, the argument requires only that the personal element in that part of the response to a novel attributable to its truth can be located elsewhere than in the assessment of the novel as being true. But a little more had better be said about this other location, for the sake of plausibility. Firstly, unfamiliarity need not be all that lends an important truth its value, or a second reading of a novel (except to refresh one's memory) would have to be valued less than the first

reading, which does not seem always to be the case. A novel can be valued as the source of a piece of knowledge and read again in appreciation of that fact. Secondly, the importance of truth, whether familiar or not, may also be a personal matter, insofar as different people measure their experience on different scales.

On the other hand, while judgments of unfamiliarity or importance *may* be personal, they need not be. A critic can properly claim that a novel states a certain truth for the first time. He may be wrong, but the matter is one of fact, not personal opinion. Similarly, a critic's claim that truth conveyed by a novel is important rests on the assumption that there is a wide agreement on the ordering of experience such that this truth is important to most people. Again, whether the critic is right or wrong, he is not just giving vent to a personal response.

Having made the subsidiary points, that the truth of a novel does not lie in a correspondence with either the author's or a reader's experience, I turn to the main problem of where it does lie, and in what ways terms like 'true' can properly be applied to novels. I assume a correspondence theory of truth, which has already been appealed to implicitly. Pragmatic accounts have been, in effect, rejected in distinguishing between the truth of a novel and the importance or value this truth may have for a reader or group of readers. A coherence theory implicit in arguments to the effect that, literary criteria being different from those applying to matters of fact, an internal consistency is a sufficient condition for the truth of a novel, is dealt with below.

I base my terminology therefore on the following assumptions:

- (1) Only statements (and, derivatively, sentences making statements) can be true or false.
- (2) All statements are either true or false.
- (3) No statement is both true and false.
- (4) A statement is true if and only if some corresponding state of affairs obtains.

Thus, to take the classic example, if 'snow is white' can be true it makes a statement, which must be either true or false, cannot be both, and is true if and only if snow is white.

Then the problem of literary truth is this. If a novel can properly be said to be true or false it makes statements. Where reference is made to degrees of truth, this must be understood to refer to the importance of the truths stated, or to the proportion of true to false statements. But in the case of a work of fiction, many of the statements that appear to be made, to the effect that such and such characters exist, and do and say such and such things, may be false. The truth of others, as in the description of a real city in which a novel is set, seems often to be quite irrelevant to the literary truth of the novel. At the other extreme, one can properly say of a biography, in which every factual statement is true, that overall it gives a quite false impression of its subject. Thus, apparently, a novel can be true when a corresponding state of affairs does not obtain, and it can be false, when a corresponding state of affairs does obtain.

There are three possible ways out of this embarrassing situation. The first is to reject a correspondence theory in general and admit different kinds of truth. The plausibility of such a suggestion, is, however, specious. It is one thing to admit different kinds of truth, such as mathematical truth, religious truth, scientific truth, in the sense of classifying statements into kinds differing in the grounds of their truth. Thus the truth of mathematical and scientific statements is established in different ways, and this is what is meant by referring to different kinds of truth. This is perfectly compatible with a correspondence theory, which asserts merely that

'God exists' is true if and only if God exists

' $2+2 = 4$ ' is true if and only if $2+2 = 4$

just as

'snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

It is another thing to admit what is needed, namely not different kinds of truth, but different *senses* of 'true', such that the *same* statement could be true in one sense (the literary sense, say) and false in another (a "factual" sense). This would be incompatible not only with a correspondence theory, but with any acceptable theory of truth. A fundamental sense of 'true' is provided by its always being appropriate to accept, assert, act on, true statements and their consequences, and not always appropriate to accept, etc., false statements and their consequences. And it is perhaps more obvious that 'appropriate' is univocal here than that 'true' is, and that there is no other sense which could make it at once appropriate and inappropriate to accept, etc., any statement. Consequently, if there were two apparently distinct senses of 'true', true₁ and true₂, so that some statements were true₁ and not true₂, then its always being appropriate to accept, etc.. such a statement would show that true₂ was not a proper sense of 'true', and its not always being appropriate would show that true₁ was not a proper sense of 'true'. In short, the notion of truth is so basic to our conceptual scheme that we cannot admit different senses of 'true'.

This conclusion suggests a second possibility, of saying that literary truth is a kind of truth to which a correspondence theory does not apply. But then the connection between literary and all the other kinds of truth, to which a correspondence theory does apply, would be so obscure as to make the use of the term 'true' highly misleading. It would be tantamount to denying that there is a substantial concept of literary truth at all. Consequently, I feel that any such proposed "solution" should be resisted as being simply an evasion of the problem, until all prospect of an account compatible with a correspondence theory has disappeared. But it is convenient to consider here the apparently plausible, and widely held, "internal consistency" account of literary truth which does implicitly reject the correspondence theory.⁴ On this account, works of fiction are not "factually" false, since they say nothing about the real world. The statements they make are all about their own world, which is unrelated to the real one, and of this world all the statements can be true. Then properly to deny such a work literary truth is to charge it with internal inconsistency. Some statements in it conflict with others, i.e. are false of the fictional world which the others define. Whether the statements are false of the real world or not, i.e. whether the work is fictional or not, is simply irrelevant and the whole problem of literary truth is thereby solved. Thus a novel can be false if one depicted phase of a character's development is inconsistent with what is said of him elsewhere in the novel. That there never was, or could be, such a character at all in real life is beside the point.

It seems to me that this view only needs to be thus baldly stated for its inadequacy to be apparent. If the detachment of literature from life were as absolute as this view requires, it would be most misleading, for example, to denote characters by typically human names and to ascribe to them typically human attributes. A novel could as well be written about non-human entities devoid of all human qualities. This makes it clear how comparison with the real world is required even to make judgments of internal consistency in a novel. To say, for example, that a character is inconsistent, is to say that a character who acts as depicted in one part of the novel could not also

⁴ eg. Hough. op. cit., §§ 81. 126, Although in the special case of novels Hough emphasizes that internal inconsistency may reflect external falseness, he seems to assume that it is independently detectable: 'Besides being a report on social reality the novel is a formal construction. and historical falsity in the novel will often reveal itself as internal contradiction.' See also I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* p. 259: 'The "Truth" of Robinson Crusoe is the acceptability of the things we are told, the acceptability in the interests of the effects of the narrative, not their correspondence with any actual fact involving Alexander Selkirk or any other ... It is in this sense that "Truth" is equivalent to "internal necessity" or rightness. That is "true" or "internally necessary" which completes or accords with the rest of the experience.' Again. E.M.. Forster, 'Anonymity: An Inquiry'. in *Two Cheers for Democracy* p. 89: '... when we are reading the *Ancient Mariner*, common knowledge disappears and uncommon knowledge takes its place. We have entered a universe that only answers to its own laws. supports itself, internally coheres, and has a new standard of truth. ... A poem is true if it hangs together.'

act as depicted in another part. But the ground for this assertion must be a general statement about the incapacities of characters of such a kind. These incapacities may be logical, physical, or psychological. The reader is evidently expected to provide the required general statement from his experience of real people and things. For this to be relevant the character must be classifiable as of such an existent kind.

Consequently, a proponent of the view just outlined must certainly admit either that characters fall under generalizations established for real people, or that his consistency judgments are purely subjective. Either alternative seems to me fatal to his account of literary truth. On the first alternative, an inconsistent novel will be one that asserts, by illustration, a possibility denied by an established generalization. It thus asserts something false about the real world, and so the original problem is regenerated. On the second alternative, a judgment of literary truth reflects no more than a personal response to the novel, and the inadequacy of this view has already been dealt with.

If we reject different senses of 'true' and a non-correspondence kind of literary truth, a third possibility remains. This is that a novel makes a set of statements, $\{S\}$, other than the set $\{S'\}$ which it ostensibly makes and which makes it fictional or non-fictional. Then the novel's literary truth is determined by the truth or falsity of the members of $\{S\}$. To give this possibility content, something must be said about the relations between typical S , S' and other relevant statements, and about the criteria for the truth or falsity of S . In the sketchy account that follows, it will be convenient still to refer to the truth or falsity of a novel, meaning roughly the truth or falsity of most S , and to reserve unqualified references to the truth or falsity of statements for S' . I shall illustrate the account with analogous situations in portraiture, which may both serve to illuminate the literary problem, and suggest how the analysis might be extended to non-literary arts.

From what has already been said about literary truth, it is clear enough that an S is a generalization—psychological, sociological, perhaps moral—true, if the novel is true, of real people. A statement S' provides an instance of the generalization S . If the novel is fictional at this point, there is no such instance and S' is false; if the novel is non-fictional at this point, S' is true. The truth conveyed in the novel is that of the generalization S , which is independent of the truth or falsity of the illustrative statement S' by which it is conveyed. For example, in Joyce Cary's novel, *The Horse's Mouth*, truth about how artists of a certain kind live and work is conveyed by statements about a particular fictional artist. In a portrait, analogously, an ostensible presentation of a facial expression that the subject may never have worn (i.e. a possibly fictional expression) is used to convey a more general truth (S) about the subject's facial character as it appears in the variety of his actual expressions.

To say so much does more to set up the problem than to answer it. We do not seem to have access to S within the novel, or portrait, independently of S' . Novels do not usually state explicitly what, if any, generalizations their particular statements are supposed to assert by illustration,⁵ and almost any collection of particular statements could be taken to illustrate some true generalization or other. In order to assess the literary truth of a novel, therefore, a critic must first decide what generalization(s) S it asserts, and then appeal to a set of accepted statements $\{S''\}$, not made in the novel, to determine the truth or falsity of S . Similarly the inference from the depicted expression in a portrait to the facial character must be supported by reference to a range of actual expressions which are not depicted. This point has already been made in rejecting internal consistency as an

⁵ Sometimes they do. For example, Proust, in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Pléiade, Vol. 1. p. 305), describes Swann's reaction to Odette's agreeing to a separation Swann himself has suggested. Proust then explicitly takes this to illustrate a psychological generalization: 'Now, the absence of a thing is not just that, it is not just a partial lack, it is an upheaval of everything else, it is a new state which cannot be foreseen in the original one' (translated P.W.M. Cogman).

adequate definition of literary truth. We must therefore also take into account the relations between S and S'' , and between S' and S'' .

A statement S'' is a statement about some real instance of the generalization S . In *The Horse's Mouth* example, S' could be a statement about the relevant characteristics (e.g. habits, working methods) of some real artist. In the portrait, S'' could be some relevant photograph. Excluding, for simplicity, the trivial special case in which a novel is about literary experience, or a portrait is of a painting, a statement is normally neither about literature nor made for literary purposes. It is simply a member of the set of statements which provide empirical evidence for or against the generalization S . An S'' is a statement accepted solely on empirical grounds. I shall take the standard criteria for accepting or rejecting such statements for granted. I assume merely that accepted statements are by and large true, that further tests can show a previously accepted statement to be false, and that such a statement will then be rejected. In a similar way, a photograph will be rejected as evidence for a man's appearance when it is shown to be taken under abnormal conditions (from an odd angle, in red light, by X-rays).

I do not intend to analyse the concept of evidence. I assume that a coherent explication of it can be given by some form of confirmation theory, probabilistic or otherwise. But on any such theory, only real instances can be evidence for or against a generalization. Thus, the generalization ' $(x)(Ax \supset Bx)$ ' is neither confirmed nor infirmed by a statement ' $Aa \& Ba$ ' or ' $Aa \& \sim Ba$ ' which is fictional because ' a ' denotes nothing within the range of x . A photograph is not evidence for a man's appearance if it is a photograph of someone else.

Now I have not assumed that a novel must be fictional, or a portrait of an expression never worn, and have specifically included such literary works as biographies. A *true* (i.e. non-fictional) statement S' in a novel can count as evidence for or against a generalization S . The above restriction of S'' to statements not made in the novel is thus too severe. A statement S' can be identified with a statement S'' . A portrait can, subject to its different conventions, convey the same information about a real facial expression as an actual photograph can. But the $\{S''\}$ cannot be exhausted by members of $\{S'\}$. At the very least, we need a statement to the effect that the novel, or portrait, is wholly non-fictional, and the truth of *this* statement can clearly not be established by the novel, or portrait, itself. Thus the need for external evidence for S remains.

Moreover, we have seen that whether or not a novel is fictional is generally irrelevant to its literary truth. Consequently, whether or not a statement S' is evidence for S does not materially affect the degree of confirmation of S . Hence the bulk of the evidence for S must come from outside even a non-fictional novel. Consider, for example, a psychological generalization, S , conveyed by a biography. The subject of the biography himself provides evidence for S , yet the novel's literary truth would be barely affected if it turned out to be fictional after all. This must imply that the evidence for S comes from a large number of real instances, of which the subject is only one. The relation between S' and S , that is pertinent to a novel's literary truth, is thus *not* the relation of being evidence for a generalization, even where that relation in fact holds. And similarly, obviously, with a portrait.

A novel does not, therefore, convey truth in the sense of presenting empirical evidence, and degrees of literary truth cannot be interpreted as corresponding to the strength of evidence presented. For example, *Hamlet* may convey psychological truths about family relationships, but is not evidence for them in the way in which a real case study would be. The portrait analogy is not, here, so close, but a portrait is not evidence for the particular facial expression worn by the subject at the time of painting in the way in which a photograph of him taken at that time could be.

The conclusion, that the truth of a novel cannot lie in its providing new evidence, seems to conflict with our conviction that true novels tell us about experience, or enable us to see things in new ways. It is important to see how much of this conviction can still be justified, and I now take in

turn the questions: How can a novel, which is not evidence, tell us about experience? How can a novel, which is not evidence, show things in a new way, change a conceptual scheme? And analogously for portraits.

A number of points need to be made about the first question. There is one clear way in which a novel can be a source of information without being evidence. If a reader knows in advance that a novel is true, but does not know in advance the truth conveyed by it, then he can learn that truth by reading the novel. It will convey to him some new truth without being evidence for it. In the same way, a portrait, antecedently known to be good, can convey truth, about a facial character, new to the observer. There is nothing mysterious about this: one may similarly learn a new mathematical truth from a schoolteacher, although his uttering it is not evidence in the way in which the statement of a proof is evidence.

But then, how can one know in advance that a novel, or portrait, is true? In the same sort of way, it seems to me, that one can come indirectly to other knowledge. One may have the word of a usually reliable critic. One may have the evidence of the author's other work, which shows him to be a habitual writer of true novels, or painter of true portraits, a man of insight, ability, integrity, etc. This sort of evidence can build up to a point where it can properly support a knowledge claim, so that the authority of the author or a critic can properly compel acceptance of what a novel asserts, as the authority of a teacher can properly compel acceptance of a theorem. In this indirect way, indeed, *that* a statement *S* is made by a reliable author is evidence for its truth, although the statements *S'* by which he makes it are not evidence. While it would be most misleading to assimilate this sort of indirect evidence to the direct evidence that a novel or portrait cannot provide, I think its force may yet be sufficient to account for all that is legitimate in the conviction that such a work cannot merely convey, but properly compel acceptance of, new truth.

Another source of this conviction is of a different kind. A novel, or portrait, may be so completely convincing that all those who peruse it in fact assent to it. An expressed judgment that a novel is true may do no more than record its causal efficacy in changing its reader's opinions. But such a quality in a novel is no more to be identified with that of providing evidence than charm and persuasiveness in a teacher is to be identified with reliability. To say that a novel, or portrait, has changed all our views on some subject is not to say that it justifies the change, yet either judgment may equally well be conveyed in remarks to the effect that we have learned something from it.

I have conceded that a context of authorship or criticism of a novel, or portrait, may constitute indirect evidence for its generalizations, and that it may be causally effective in getting them accepted. Can possession of either of these qualities be identified with possession of literary truth? I think not. In the first case, it is circumstantial evidence that may properly convince us in advance that the novel, or portrait, conveys truth, but this conviction cannot be self-justifying. The steadiest of authors may write one false book; the most reliable of critics may be wrong. It must always be possible for direct evidence *S''* of the falsity of the generalizations *S* conveyed to outweigh such indirect evidence as a novel can be said to advance. Consequently a prior assignment of literary truth, however firmly based, can always be reversed on more direct and stronger grounds, just as an utterance of the most reliable of mathematics teachers is susceptible of disproof. Ascriptions of literary truth are therefore not just in the gift of reliable critics. Indeed, their reliability must largely be established by their having been right in ascribing truth or falsity to other novels.

It is even more obvious that to say of a novel that it is true is not to say that it is overwhelmingly plausible. It is not meaningless to say that all the readers of a true novel have mistakenly rejected it, perhaps because it has been misunderstood. Similarly, the concept of a glib, appealing, popular novel which is yet false, is not incoherent. It has already been shown that acceptance by reliable critics does not completely prove a novel or portrait to be true; the proof can hardly be completed by adding the acceptance of *unreliable* critics. Again, to account for a critic's

failing to see the truth of a work, by referring to his lack of sensitivity, maturity, or experience, is not just to predict that he will come to see it when he has acquired suitable (and independently measurable) quantities of these items. One may indeed predict such an outcome, as one may predict a novel portrait accepted by sensitive, mature and experienced judges to be true, but such connections are not necessary, and will serve to define neither literary nor painterly truth.

I now turn to the second question, of how a novel, which is not evidence, can change a conceptual scheme, and I consider first whether this attributed ability can be identified with literary truth. The suggestion has an immediate appeal, because it seems to enable literary truth to be detached from other kinds of truth (since a conceptual scheme cannot be straightforwardly true or false), while preserving a valuable objective relation of, say, appropriateness between the novel and its subject matter which might plausibly be put by saying that one is “true to” the other. This appeal, however, is only immediate. A changed conceptual scheme may not be either true or false, but *that* it is more appropriate to a given subject matter than was the unchanged scheme is certainly either true or false, and this is the relevant judgment. It is hardly enough for a novel, or portrait, to present us with a new way of seeing something, however fuzzily and distortedly. To assess the novel as valuable in this respect requires at least that the new way is some sort of improvement on the old way. So the assessment of a novel as true, understood in this sense, involves at least asserting that the subject matter of the novel can be dealt with adequately using new concepts provided by the work. This is a generalization *S*, true or false, about the subject matter, that is conveyed by the novel. So understanding the ascription of literary truth in this sense still leaves the original problem, of the relation between *S*, and the particular statements *S'*. Nevertheless, it seems to be true, and important to note, that many generalizations advanced by novels are of this kind.

It remains to say something about the relation between the statements *S'* and the generalizations *S*, by which the latter can be identified in order to be assessed as true or false on external evidence. I shall distinguish especially between generalizations made within an unchanged conceptual scheme, and the kind just referred to as asserting, the aptness of a changed scheme.

The first question about this relation which the above account poses is one that suggests a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against it: if the value of a novel lies in the truth of its illustrated generalizations, which could presumably be stated explicitly, what justifies writing novels at all? Two points can be made at once in reply to this. First, I have not assumed that literary truth is the only valuable feature of a novel. Even if the generalizations conveyed could be stated explicitly, such a statement would lack these other (e.g. stylistic) features, which therefore, given the truth of the generalizations, justify the existence of the novel as an art form. Secondly, the presumption that a generalization can always be stated explicitly is questionable. Indeed the whole point of writing a novel often seems to be to convey by illustration a general truth that cannot be stated explicitly. The notion of an unstatable generalization is a highly unsatisfactory one to invoke in an analysis, but it seems unavoidable. What follows is largely an attempt to render it, and the preceding analysis based on it, more acceptable.

Consider the situation of a science in whose subject matter there are evidently some regularities, although no satisfactory formulations of law have been made. (By ‘science’ here I mean nothing more elaborate than a public activity of collecting and testing some kind of general empirical information. In this wide sense, virtually everyone is, *inter alia*, a scientist to some extent, and possesses a great deal of scientific knowledge, embodied in the presuppositions of his common language.) This does not seem a conceptually incoherent description of such a science, nor is the situation described one of complete general ignorance of its subject matter. But general information can at this stage only be conveyed by the statement of particular occurrences taken to be typically illustrative of the, as yet unformulated, regularities. It is just the conviction that such occurrences are typical that constrains any proposed law to account for them on pain of not covering the given

subject matter. Hence arise the “natural history” descriptions of particular observations and experiments in this stage of a science, which form the basis for any later generalizations of law and theory that may account for and supersede them. There is, of course, much more to be said than this: for example, that regularity is presupposed in the description of a particular occurrence as of a certain typical kind; that given a conviction of the existence of such a kind, the particular occurrence may be fictional, as in the scientific use of so-called “thought experiments”. But the above should be enough to indicate that a proper conviction of the existence of unformulated regularities exhibited in particular occurrences is not only conceptually possible, but factually necessary to the process of developing a science to a more generally formulated state.

Now the complexity of the psychological and sociological phenomena that are the subject matter of novels seems likely to prolong the natural history stage of the corresponding sciences, perhaps indefinitely. But the general knowledge of these phenomena is of the most immediate pragmatic interest to people living in society. Hence, while literature, through its illustrative instances, is the sole conveyer of these general truths, it retains the importance of indispensability.

To say this is not to say that any particular science must in time acquire enough explicit generalizations to deprive the corresponding literature of its exclusive role. Even where that does occur, it need make the literature neither redundant nor properly describable as merely a precursor of advancing science. Nevertheless, the length of time a literary work does anticipate the general statement of an important truth is clearly an element in its critical status, as with some of the works of Shakespeare and the Greek dramatists, most of whose general truths are still not explicitly formulated.

I now turn at last to the question of how an unformulated generalization S can be recognized through the particular statements S' of a novel, sufficiently clearly to bring external statements of evidence S'' to bear on an assessment of its truth. In this section, the analogy with portraits is particularly illuminating. I consider, for simplicity, only the case of one generalization, although in a novel of any complexity, several generalizations will be conveyed. The problem is that the particular statements of a novel seem to be consistent with too wide a range of generalizations, some true and some false. One can imagine the novel expanded by a variety of different particular statements about a character, which could entirely alter the overall impression of the book. Some expanded versions would be true, some false. How, then, can the unexpanded version be definitely classified one way, when mere expansion can make it classifiable the other way? We require some means of restricting permissible expansions of a novel, so that they all fall under generalizations of the same truth value. Similarly with versions cut in detail, as plays frequently are for performance.

Similarly, for example, whether or not an expression of pain on a facial portrait can be taken to convey a general facial characteristic depends on how the rest of the corresponding full-length portrait can be filled in. If it is filled in so as to depict the subject as completely comfortable, the generalization is presumably warranted. But for example, it is filled in to depict the subject under Chinese torture, the generalization is unwarranted. One or other of these possibilities must be excluded for the intended generalization, and hence the truth or falsity of the portrait, to be determined.

In short, it is plain that the problem is one of representation, and of a kind not peculiar to literature. That it is evidently soluble, there as elsewhere, suggests that the method of solution, there as elsewhere, rests on the use of conventions. The role of convention in representation is a vast and much discussed topic, but a few points may profitably be made in this context. In the portrait case, there are conventions about what can be represented by the depiction of a face. That the subject is sitting or standing in reasonable physical comfort is an inference sanctioned by such a convention. If the expression depicted is to represent an effect of Chinese torture, some specific, positive, indication of this must be put into the portrait. It is not enough for it to be compatible with what is

depicted. In the absence of any positive indication, the convention excludes such an interpretation, the generalization to a pained-looking facial characteristic is warranted, and the truth of the portrait is accordingly decidable.

It is fairly clear that analogous conventions must underlie the interpretation of novels, though it seems to me neither possible nor necessary to elaborate on them here. But their general role, of excluding generalizations based on eccentric instances not given in the novel, will serve to clarify the basic problems. One is the point of invoking fictional instances to convey true generalizations; the other is the way in which factual instances can convey false generalizations. In the first case, the relevant convention may decree that a generalization about, say, a real person's courage should be conveyed by a report of his behaviour in a certain kind of situation. Now it may so happen that he never was in such a situation, so that the true generalization must be conveyed by a fictional statement about his behaviour. In the second case, suppose the person not to have been generally courageous, although he did once behave in the requisite way in such a situation. Then the factual report of this behaviour will, by virtue of the relevant convention, convey an entirely false general impression of the person's courage. This is an example of the way in which a factually impeccable biography can properly be said to be false.

The final point to be made concerns the origins of novelistic conventions. They are clearly not imposed on novelists from outside, but evolved by them in the course of their work. Then it may be a major achievement for a novelist to devise a convention by which more subtle generalizations can be more effectively or economically conveyed. Thus he may show, by illustration, that certain psychological characteristics are better represented by reporting a character's thought than his spoken words. The adoption of a new convention in a novel may, therefore, in itself convey a general truth about such characteristics, which the novel's readers can verify from their own experience. This is an instance of the truth conveyed being of the appropriateness of a changed conceptual scheme, to which I have already referred and which causes the value of a novel sometimes to be equated with its ability to make us see things in a new way. The analogy with portraiture is, of course, obvious, where the adoption of a new convention, such as that of Impressionism, or Cubism, causes us to see the face depicted in a new way which, in assessing a portrait in such a style to be true, we deem to be especially appropriate.

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