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Murdoch, Danto and Camp:
Metaphor in Existential Literature

This paper will discuss several theories of metaphor, including 'prop theory' and 'interaction theory', as well as Elizabeth Camp's argument for a distinction between "making-believe" and "pretending". This distinction will then be utilized in a discussion of Arthur Danto and Iris Murdoch's conception of the divide between philosophy and literature. Finally, the fruits of this discussion will be explored in light of the role that existentialism plays in our current philosophical climate, and the role that literature will play in responding to existential thought as it further pervades intellectual society.

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In his 1984 paper "Philosophy As/And/Of Literature", the famed art critic Arthur Danto admitted that he could not "acquiesce in the thought that philosophy is literature. It continues to aim at truth" (Danto 83). Danto draws this conclusion due to his conception of philosophy as an activity that reveals us "not metaphorically" but "really". I will admit that I find Danto's assertion troubling: it seems that, if anything, philosophy is far more metaphorical than most fictive literature. In order to examine Danto's delineation between philosophy and literature along metaphorical grounds, we will need to explore several theories of metaphor, including those of Max Black and Elizabeth Camp, such that we might be able to decommission Danto's *dividis metaphoricae* and replace it with a better theory to support the philosophical-literary distinction. In turn, our exploration will allow us to synthesize Camp's ideas about metaphors with the writings of Iris Murdoch (among others) in the hopes that the resulting combination will show us a path forward in the face of the now fashionable mode of philosophical inquiry that can be called existentialism.

Ask any high school student for the definition of metaphor, and they will more often than not recite something that they have been taught from a young age: *a metaphor is a comparison that has not use the terms "like" or "as".* But this definition only scratches the surface; we will need a far greater understanding of metaphor if we are to accept or refute Danto's distinction. Let us begin, then, with Kendall Walton's theory of metaphor, commonly referred to as the 'prop theory'. By likening metaphors to the toys that children use when playing pretend, Walton suggests that metaphorical and literary fictions both make use of objects to imaginary ends (Walton 13). That is, an object such as a powdered wig might allow a mother to imagine her eight-year-old son, Rory, as, say, an English magistrate. The more props that support an

imaginary scenario, the easier the scenario will be to imagine. Let us use another example: Rory is a lion. To say that "Rory is a lion" is to use Rory as a prop in making believe that he is a lion. Perhaps it was Rory's mother that made this remark whilst watching her son quickly devour a flank steak, or perhaps it was his long hair that reminded his mother of a lion's mane. In either case, Rory's appetite/hair is being used as a 'prop' in his mother's game of make-believe.

As we explore theories of metaphor, it becomes increasingly apparent that many of our basic concepts (and even common phrases) make heavy use of metaphor: Take, for instance, the phrase "high temperature", which is considered to be a so-called dead metaphor; we rarely realize that it is a metaphor. By referring to the day as being high in temperature, we simply imply that the temperature recorded that day is perhaps higher than usual on the thermometer, the apparatus through which we measure and understand temperature. When we feel a temperature as being relatively hot, we designate it as 'high'. Of course, we are not actually referring to the physical height of a temperature, which would be as unhelpful as it would be nonsensical. Dead metaphors like "high temperature" help us to navigate abstractions which are useful and indeed often essential to navigating the world around us. This phenomenon was most effectively explored by linguist Michael Reddy, whose 'conduit metaphor' demonstrated that many of our everyday concepts, such as "putting words in my mouth", "giving you an idea", and "loaded question" rely almost entirely on the idea that humans insert and extract meanings into and from our own words. This is, of course, a metaphorical concept. Reddy's contribution to the philosophy of metaphor is skillfully summed up by Andrew Ortony in his book *Metaphor and Thought: "*With a single, thoroughly analyzed example, [Reddy] allowed us to see, albeit in a restricted domain, that ordinary everyday English is largely metaphorical, dispelling once and for

all the traditional view that metaphor is primarily in the realm of poetic or 'figurative' language"
(Ortony 203-204). In this excerpt, Ortony has rightfully pointed out that metaphor is as useful
conceptually as it is figuratively; this duality will quickly become pertinent to our discussion. Of
course, the true genius of Reddy's conduit metaphor is not necessarily its explanation of
individual metaphorical phrases, but rather its insinuation that metaphor is an important part of
the way that we conceptualize the world around us. Primordial traces of this theory appear in
works such as Nietzsche's *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,* in which the writer
suggests that it is not "pure knowledge, which has no consequences" that the human intellect is
seeking by naturally forming metaphors, but rather the "agreeable life-preserving consequences
of truth", or, in other words, its conceptual utility (Nietzsche para 6). One can easily see the
result of this discovery: because metaphor is simply a way of making sense of the world,
metaphors cannot be true or false. This proposition is the basis of Max Black's theory of
metaphor, known as 'interaction theory'.

　　Black's interactionist model of metaphor is based on the idea that a metaphorical
statement, insofar as it juxtaposes two concepts by comparison, does not actually create truth (or
a new truth-value), but rather divulges new associations and meanings which are not wholly
present in each of its literal constituents (Black 70). This view is also supported by the writings
of Donald Davidson, who claims in *What Metaphors Mean,* that *"*since in most cases what the
metaphor prompts or inspires is not entirely, or even at all, recognition of some truth or fact, the
attempt to give literal expression to the content of the metaphor is simply misguided" (Davidson
47).

Elizabeth Camp, a contemporary philosopher of metaphor, certainly seems to agree with both Black and Davidson, claiming that "when artworks do become metaphors for reality in these various ways, it is neither just the described contents itself, nor just the artwork's general perspective, which frames our understanding; rather we see our own lives *through* that content *as* interpreted from that perspective" (Camp 124). Possibly inspired by Black's approach to metaphor, Camp makes the argument that whilst Walton's account of mental pretense considers metaphor and fiction to be simply two different orientations of the same "game" of mental pretense, he is actually glossing over an important distinction between two disparate types of pretending. In her essay "Two Varieties of Literary Imagination", Camp suggests that mental pretense (pretending), insofar as it is understood through Walton's viewpoint, is in desperate need of revision. Camp offers a useful distinction that can help us to delineate between two specific types of pretending: making-believe and imagining. According to Camp, to make-believe is to "suppose a set of propositions to be true", whereas imagination is an experiential state whereby a particular scenario is brought to bear on the mind's eye, as if it were "before one" (Camp 110). With Camp's delineation now established, we can venture into the larger topic of this paper: philosophy's role in/as literature.

In a 1992 interview with the *Henry James Review,* Danto discusses the similarities and differences that he sees between philosophy and literature. During the interview, Danto asserts that the fiction writer might benefit from reading philosophy from a purely stylistic viewpoint: "I think philosophers, when they do write well, write better than anybody" (Danto 1997). Referencing the writings of W. V .O. Quine as an example of the "concision and wit" that are prized by good writers, Danto makes an interesting claim: "Philosophy is a poetry of thought, if

you like" (Danto 1997). Camp certainly seems to agree with this claim, writing that "insofar as

philosophy takes us on detours through wildly counterfactual terrain and employs metaphors and

fictions to reconfigure our understanding of what really is, its methods are not as far removed

from poetry as we might initially have thought" (Camp 129). But how can this comparison

between poetic and philosophical writing help us to delineate between philosophy and literature

as separate genres?

Distinguishing between prose and poetry can be a tricky business, and so I will offer an

observation that was recently pointed out to me: when one is reading a poem and has to pause, it

is often because something in the poem has suddenly "made sense" (think interactionism here),

whereas when one is reading prose and has to pause, it is often because something *does not*

"make sense". This might explain the fact that reading philosophical literature is generally an

incredibly taxing activity, as philosophy often combines the rampant symbolism that is native to

poetry with the prosaic style that is native to literature, yielding a massively complex and dense

genre. This complexity most likely stems from the academy's rejection of aphoristic collections,

which are very popular in the Eastern tradition, in favor of the pseudo-scientific, overly technical

and (often largely) indecipherable offerings of the Western, analytic tradition. Championed by

such icons as Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, analytic philosophy (in its current

state) has ventured now beyond words into the realm of pure, formal, symbolic logic, all in an

attempt to close the diminished (though nonetheless impenetrable) systemic inconsistencies that

Wittgenstein was, ostensibly, unable to account for. And it is here, bathing in the afterglow of the

analytic philosopher's dominance over contemporary philosophy, that we may turn to Iris

Murdoch, a British philosopher of language and literature, whose writings can help us to establish a distinction between philosophy and literature.

In a collection of essays entitled *Existentialists and Mystics,* Murdoch suggests that "Thought, especially literature, but the other arts too, carries a built-in self-critical recognition of its incompleteness. It accepts and celebrates jumble, and the bafflement of the mind by the world. The incomplete pseudo-object, the work of art, is a lucid commentary upon itself" (Murdoch 240). But where does this leave philosophy, whose tendency to evade categorization as either art or science has puzzled academics for as long as it has been practiced? Philosophy, it seems, cannot make the same claim to baffled jubilation, as philosophical writings are based almost entirely on the integration of one abstract symbol with another (mind/body, will/habit, cause/effect), such that any given symbol could eventually be somehow verified as being 'true' of our 'objective' reality. Murdoch recognizes the inconsistency with which the philosopher (much like the physicist, chemist, or biologist) must grapple: "The philosopher must face tautology and constantly look back at that less strictly conceptualized 'ordinary world'" (Murdoch 11). This *bellum omnium contra omnes* (Hobbes' "war of all against all") is central to philosophy's proto-scientific inclination towards completeness, which Nietzsche posits as the impetus for all conceptual human constructions (Nietzsche para 6-7). Thus, we can begin to understand philosophy as a propositional and representational activity that stands in opposition to literature, a genre which relies mainly on a phenomenological, experiential approach to writing, offering vivid descriptions and abundant information on characters, events, and dialogue.

This all being said, it seems that we have isolated a distinction between philosophy and literature. In the case of the latter, we are often expected to make our own judgements and

propositions about what we have read. Philosophy, on the other hand, due to the fact that is tasked with divulging knowledge, relies on a rational approach to writing; the author is all but required (semantically speaking) to implicitly (and often explicitly) state their thesis. As follows, we can delineate between philosophy and literature based on the presence of assertions that expound specific, conceptual content; that is, philosophy is fundamentally propositional. I will state this distinction as clearly as I am able to: a purely philosophical text explores a concept by making specific judgements and truth-claims, whereas a purely literary text explores the concept via description and by refraining from making such truth-claims. But is it really possible for us to react to only the philosophical and not the artistic aspects of a text? I think it is unlikely.

As any particular text is sure to be a mixture of both the artistic (literary) and the philosophical, take Kierkegaard's "Either/Or" for example, narrated by the mysterious 'A'. It would be quite impossible to separate these two disparate aspects of any given text: where do A's reflections end and his assertions begin? Murdoch certainly seems to agree with this, explaining that "the unconscious mind is not a philosopher. For better and worse art goes deeper than philosophy" (Murdoch 21). This realization reaffirms Murdoch's own view that "we enjoy art, even simple art, because it disturbs us in deep, often incomprehensible ways; and this is one reason why it is good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad" (Murdoch 10). Offering her own views on the semantic differences between philosophy and literature, Murdoch suggests that "Of course, philosophy too is an imaginative activity, but the statements at which it aims are totally unlike the 'concrete statement' of art, and its methods and atmosphere, as those of science, inhibit the temptations of personal fantasy" (Murdoch 11). Here, Murdoch is suggesting that the further that we move away from the concrete and arbitrary

(counter-intuitively referred to in our discussion as one's "imagination"), the more we will be

prone to insinuate, inject, and indeed '*make*-believe' based on metaphorical and/or symbolic

arguments. Danto certainly seems to concur with this viewpoint, suggesting that the "philosopher

would cheerfully consign the entirety of fiction to the domain of falsehood but for the nagging

concern that a difference is to be marked between sentences which miss the mark and sentences

which have no mark to miss and are threatened, in consequence of prevailing theories, with

meaninglessness" (Danto 68). In the case of philosophical literature, the author's propositional

claim is (for the most part) made clear by their thesis, whereas, in the case of the literary novel,

the reader must create their own meaning as they read it: "literature is not universal in the sense

of being about every possible world...but rather about each reader who experiences it...each work

of literature shows in this sense an aspect we would not know were ours without benefit of that

mirror: each discovers...an unguessed dimension of the self" (Danto 78-9).

     Perhaps this is why literature seems to withstand obsoleteness in a way that philosophical

writings often struggle to do. After all, why do we not read medieval philosophy to the same

extent that we read Dante's *Divine Comedy*? It hardly seems as though the publication of Kant's

Critique of Pure Reason could have done anywhere near as much damage to Defoe's *Robinson*

Crusoe as it did to Hume's *Enquiry into Human Understanding.* The former, of course, is based

on a fictive (though nonetheless concrete) reality, whilst the latter is centered around an abstract,

circular, metaphysical, and metaphorical system of meaning. As soon as a system is deemed

incomplete (as a post-Kantian reading of Hume might be considered to be), then its truth claims,

such as the impossibility of causal relationships, rapidly lose their truth-value. Literature, on the

other hand, whose claims are largely non-propositional, may even improve as time goes by, such

as in the case of Franz Kafka, who was mostly ignored during his life, and whose works have increased in notoriety ever since his death in 1924. During his interview with the Henry James Review, Danto offered his own thoughts on Kafka, whom the interviewer suggests is a master of literalizing metaphor: "That's really true. I read a piece in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Kundera on Kafka… He feels that if you really want to understand sexuality, you've got to take passages like those of *The Trial*, a scene where they're making love on the floor behind the bar. Kundera thought that this was an extraordinary metaphor for sex--that Kafka had almost perfect pitch when it came to describing things like that" (Danto 1997).

Certainly, Kafka certainly seemed to grasp (and indeed harness) the imaginative power of literature. In one of his letters to a former classmate named Oskar Pollak, Kafka insisted that: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief" (Kafka 16). Kafka recognized that literature was primarily used tasked not with representation, but instead with emotional/cognitive transformation: "we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide" (Kafka 16). We tend to avoid discussions of these types of experiences; Kafka's posthumous rise in notoriety is doubtless a result of the rise of existentialist thought in modern society.

It is clear then that literature can affect us in two different ways. It can affect us aesthetically (that is, emotionally); such is the case with all novels deemed to be *Kafkaesque*. It can also affect us conceptually, altering our understanding of the world that we live in, such as is the case with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which makes aphoristic and therefore propositional claims. By applying Elizabeth Camp's distinction between 'making-belief' and

'imagining' to these two disparate effects, we can see the practical and indeed significant difference between the two aspects of a literary/philosophical work. Camp suggests that by "broadening our range of experience, fiction can provoke us to notice and respond empathetically to similar people and situations as we encounter them in real life" (Camp 116). This is, of course, the true argument for the utility of literature: it allows us to experience existence through a lens alternative to our own, and this new perspective might allow us to "reconfigure" as Camp puts it, "our moral and psychological theories more generally" (Camp 116). Camp highlights the unique benefit of such a reconfiguration, explaining that a fiction can give us new insights into "what is important, what sorts of people and possibilities are out there, and how we ought to respond to them" (Camp 117).

Put simply, it is my belief that the aesthetic aspect of literature is almost certainly achieved through the process that Camp refers to as imagination, whereas the communicative, representational, and indeed propositional aspect of literature (that affect us conceptually) is achieved through what Camp calls the process of "making-belief". Camp posits this relationship quite explicitly, arguing that the literary novel (which allows us to imagine a certain scenario) is "functioning as a proxy for life, allowing us to acquire experiential knowledge without the pain, risk, and time investment—and sometimes, metaphysical impossibility—that they normally entail" (Camp 116). There we have it, then: Generally speaking, philosophy aims at truth insofar as it seeks to apply metaphorical meaning and concepts to our lives, whereas literature (as it is commonly conceived) seeks to engender emotional and cognitive insight into worlds that we do not have regular mental access to. Surely this can explain Danto's response to being asked whether philosophy (or even its socially-scientific spin-off, psychology) could entirely replace

fiction in the long run: "No, no. For me, I still, I'm afraid, read fiction in order to put my own life

in perspective...I read Henry James' *The Ambassadors* in my fifties when I was between

marriages--how does an older man conduct an affair?--I couldn't have gotten that from any

psychologists in the world" (Danto 1997). Here, Danto is suggesting a practical utility of

literature that he experienced during his own life, but in order to truly see the distinction between

making-believe and imagination, we must turn again to Murdoch, who has some wise words to

offer at this point in our discussion: "It is easy to say that there is no God. It is not so easy to

believe it and to draw the consequences" (Murdoch 226). Here, Murdoch has isolated an

important aspect of belief: the live option, a concept widely attributed to the American

philosopher William James, who posited that a proposition must be a live option before it can be

realistically held as belief; that is, it is necessary (though not sufficient) that one believes a

hypothesis *could be true* before one can legitimately believe it *to be true.* With this established,

one should not have trouble in understanding the remarkable advantage of literature over

philosophy in terms of actually imbuing knowledge: Literature, depending on how well it is

written, lets us vividly witness the specific and alien experience of another individual. Danto

seems to agree here: "addressing philosophy as literature is not meant to stultify the aspiration to

philosophical truth so much as to propose a caveat against a reduced concept of reading… to get

at that kind of truth involves some kind of transformation in the audience" (Danto 66). Thus we

have arrived at what I will call a Nietzschean retrospective: Inert truth can be simply reflected,

whereas live belief must be projected onto a relative reality. Thus philosophy is low-pain,

low-gain in terms of affecting one's actions, whereas literature might well have a greater effect

tangible on us insofar as it allows us to "imagine a scenario" to such a degree that our emotions are given the chance to factor in and reinforce our newfound designs.

The present era is marked by a dizzying intellectual tailspin, as the academic is forced to frantically reconcile the utopian ideals of Modernism (in all of its formalist splendour) with a rapidly approaching, postmodern existential bedrock. As one makes the world-shattering discovery (perhaps with the help of Jean-Paul Sartre) that reality, at its base, is without meaning, one might begin to understand how complex, groundless, and utterly subjective our axiological and epistemological arguments actually are. In Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism,* Sartre finishes the work done by Kierkegaard on existentialism, and presents his famous epistemological formula: *existence precedes essence*. Indeed, one might be able to draw a similar conclusion from the sixth chapter of the Wittgenstein's Tractatus, namely: All propositions are of equal value. Here, Wittgenstein has made an important realization: absolute, propositional truth has little moral effect on us. After all, how does the fact that "the sum of the interior angles of a triangle equal 180°" help us to live a good life? There are of course many other concepts that are relevant to this argument, such as Wimsatt and Beardsley's theory of the intentional fallacy, as well as Derrida's notion of structural freeplay, though I fear that their inclusion would do more to dilute this paper than it would do to enhance it, so I will refrain from discussing them here.

So where does this leave us, the modern individual? As Murdoch puts is so superbly: "We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him" (Murdoch 290). Existentialism and deconstructionism have all but neutered the current philosophical landscape; "in morals and politics" as Murdoch explains, "we have stripped ourselves of concepts" (Murdoch 296). But not all hope is lost. Murdoch suggests that

"Literature, in curing its own ills, can give us a new vocabulary of experience, and a truer picture of freedom. With this, renewing our sense of distance, we may remind ourselves that art too lives in a region where all human endeavour is failure" (Murdoch 296). Deconstructionists like Derrida and Foucault have challenged our notion of structure, centrality, and formalism to such a degree that the "life-preserving claims", lauded by Nietzsche, are all but indefensible; we have lost the Romantic touch, and our lives are now as ungrounded as they ever have been. We have been told by romantics like Walt Whitman and Thomas Jefferson that our individuality is paramount, that the authoritative word has been largely found out and rendered obsolete by democracy, and yet all the while we are being torn by the deconstructionists from our existential footing, desperately in need of an empirical center of gravity (versus an ideal one), a center that can only be achieved through experience. We need, according to Murdoch, to turn to (imaginative) literature in order to develop "a new vocabulary of attention...through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our own lives" (Murdoch 393-4). As follows, it is no longer sufficient for the (truly prophetic) public intellectual to simply choose between philosophy and literature, and perhaps that is for the best. Philosopher-novelists such as Ayn Rand, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre have all been met with overwhelming success in their attempts to carefully interweave these two textual species called philosophy and literature, be it by combination, such as in the case of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged,* or by division, such as Camus' incredible novel *The Stranger* and its accompanying propositional text, *The Myth of Sisyphus.*

So whilst philosophy and literature have many semantic differences, none of them can be used as individual and/or insoluble markers when it comes to separating the two formats (metaphor not excluded). Instead, we must admit that, whilst generally inseparable in practice,

philosophy and literature both operate on metaphorical grounds, albeit in two rather different ways. As for closing remarks, I will once again defer to Murdoch, who offers us a way forward in the face of existential dread and its socio-political counterpart, Liberalism: "We need to turn our attention away from the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism" (Murdoch 294).

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