Ontological Analysis of Literary Work of Art

Abstract: Ontological structures can aid the understanding and modelling of works of art. Ontology of the aesthetic object, and particularly of the literary work, has been analysed by Hartmann and Ingarden. Application of Dahlberg's ontical 'systematifier' model enabled us to organize the entire structure of the Thesaurus of Italian Literature, and to highlight a number of significant aspects of the literary work. After describing the conclusions arising from the experience of compiling the thesaurus, the paper briefly outlines Hartmann's and Ingarden's theories of levels and seeks to identify commonalities between the ontological analysis of the two theories and the conclusions of the thesaurus.

1. Introduction

The interest in the studies referred to in this paper was prompted by Roberto Poli's article 'Levels' (Poli, 1998), where the author emphasises the difference between levels of reality and levels of description and specifies that levels of reality have a strictly ontological valence, while those of description have a strictly epistemological one. On analysing the theories of three groups of authors, Poli points out that the problem of levels is present in their works and that a number of reciprocal influences emerge.

Following Poli's reasoning, we turned our attention to the theories of the phenomenologists Nicolai Hartmann and Roman Ingarden, who studied the aesthetic object, and the literary work in particular, from an ontological point of view. Their theories were of close concern to us because we had organised the Thesaurus of Italian Literature and set out reflections which seemed to be a milestone in the ontological results arising from the practical structuring of literary terms. Application of the ontological 'systematifier' model enabled us to organize the entire structure. It also enabled us to show that the literary work is a complex structure, and to highlight some of its distinctive features.

In what follows, we shall first present the results of our work on the thesaurus and discuss the principle of levels set out in Hartmann's and Ingarden's theories. We shall then show a number of features shared by the two theories and compare them with our own conclusions from our structuring work.

2. The conception of the literary work that emerged from our work on the Thesaurus

The Thesaurus of Italian Literature is based on an ordering of the subjects indexed by LI.AB (Letteratura Italiana. Aggiornamento Bibliografico), a current bibliography on what has been published on Italian literature from its origins to the present time. In order to organize the subjects, we used the 'systematifier', a set of categories devised by I. Dahlberg to organize the plan of a conceptual system (Dahlberg, 1991, p.110). These categories provided the framework for the
organization of our literary terms, the first three of them in particular: what we called the ‘core categories’ and which enabled us to draw a number of key conclusions on ‘what literature is’.

The core categories were the following: (a) theory and principles related to the domain’s object; (b) object’s description; (c) activities and processes related to the object.

In order to apply them to the field of literature we had to identify its ontological features. Since the concept literature refers to a set of literary works, and the type of literature is characterized by the kind of work examined, we identified the literary work as object of our analysis. Consequently it was to the nature and properties of the literary work that we had to refer.

Our analysis showed that the literary work is a complex phenomenon which involves numerous characteristics, many of which stand in opposition to each other. This opposition emerges in following aspects: materiality and immateriality; determinacy and indeterminacy; truth and non-truth. Materiality represents the ‘external dimension’ of the work, while all other characteristics concern its ‘internal dimension’ or content. We called this last the ‘literary fact’, an artificial construct used to represent an event that occurs at a particular moment and in a particular place, and to which the author transfers his/her creative image. The literary fact comprises not only the sentiments, passions and ideals that have inspired the author but also the way in which they have been expressed.

Materiality and literary fact identify the literary work as object. Consequently description of work and types of works should be attributed to the category b) ‘literary work as object’. In organizing these concepts our attention was devoted to the literary fact. We could establish that the type of work is the way in which the literary fact is presented, as in the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>according to the form</th>
<th>according to content</th>
<th>according to mode of production</th>
<th>according to final production</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>anthology</td>
<td>almanac</td>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>unfinished work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>bestiary</td>
<td>original work</td>
<td>unpublished work</td>
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<tr>
<td>play</td>
<td>biography</td>
<td>Plagiarism …</td>
<td>first edition…</td>
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<tr>
<td>collection of letters</td>
<td>chronicle</td>
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<tr>
<td>poetry…</td>
<td>diary …</td>
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Tab.1.- Typology of literary work

The category a) ‘theory of the literary work’ is analysis of the latter’s structural constituent foundations as well as of the processes and methods used by literary criticism to identify its elements. The subjects falling within this category were grouped according to whether they concerned theory of the literary fact, theory of criticism, theory of translation.

The creation of a literary work by the author is the process that produces the literary fact; interpretation is the process that seeks to clarify that fact. Like the reader, also the critic interprets the literary fact, and the interpretation furnished is
‘value added’ for comprehension of the literary fact. The category c) consisted of criticism as action taken on a literary work. It was decided that all of the intellectual activity carried out with a view to acquiring knowledge about the literary fact should be regarded as constituting the ‘process concerning the object’. This focuses on the action and procedure of interpreting the content of a work in order to grasp the author’s creative image. On the basis of these principles it was possible to identify further categories and consequently classify all the other subjects.

In our reflections it was emerged that each interpretation may be questioned and subjected to further criticism and a literary work can never be entirely brought to light.

3. The thought of Nicolai Hartman

Hartmann did not study the literary work as an ontological object, but rather the work of art in general. However, his detailed analysis of descriptive and non-descriptive arts highlights the features that characterize the poetic work, distinguishing it from others. It is to this analysis that we refer in this section. The fact that Hartmann frequently makes explicit reference also to not exclusively poetic literary works enables his theory to be extended to the literary work in general, and thus to be compared with Ingarden’s thought.

A poetic work is an object in which it is a concrete work created by a writer, and a representation. Aesthetics seek to reveal the knowledge concealed in this representation.

A work-object is shaped from physical-material elements: language, words and the act of writing make the work real and shape its materiality (Materie). These elements serve to express a content, a theme (Stoff), in which the sentiments, pains and destinies which the author wishes to communicate are present. The representation emerges from this content. The structure of the content is of particular importance in Hartmann’s theory.

Two closely connected levels¹ can be distinguished in a poetic work: the foreground (Vordergrund), which is real because it is that of materiality; and the background (Hintergrund), which arises from the former, concerns the content (Gehalt) and its structure, and is ideal. A poetic work is ontologically characterized by this opposition. The perceiving subject intervenes but remains extraneous to the stratification.

The words that describe settings, characters, actions and feelings create an apparent world in which the reader participates as if it were real. The author of the poetic work indirectly expresses his/her ideals or psychological states, and through the personages created by his/her imagination transmits his/her life-experiences more or less overtly. The concepts conveyed by the words provide the reader with a vision (Anschauung) which may be limited to, or contrary to, the covert one that inspired the author. As deeper-lying contents are uncovered, they reveal forms, values and destinies which are not described materially. These visions generate appearance relationships (Erscheinungsverhältnis).

Compared with those of the other arts, a work of poetry has the most complex content and the highest level of ideality in comparison to the semantic poverty of the words. A poetic work, therefore, does not have one simple background layer but a whole interconnected series of them. The background, in fact, breaks up into the fantastic profundities of the ideas, not immediately, but
mediately through other non-real and aesthetic layers.

From this one may conclude that a poetic work, but also a play, a novel or an epic, presents:
- a foreground and a background according to its 'manner of being';
- several layers according to the 'overall structure of the content' or its 'inner form' (Hartmann identifies seven such layers: 1966, p. 183).

The essence of the poetic work as an aesthetic object resides in the appearance relationship. The ability of Hartmann's aesthetic inquiry to make every layer of the background visible is its key achievement.

4. The thought of Roman Ingarden

Ingarden examined the ontology of the literary work in his essay 'Das literarische Kunstwerk', in which he described it as an intentional object requiring both real and ideal elements.

A literary work requires a real object because it is a material entity independent of either the writer or the reader; and at the same time it is a representation requiring ideal objects as well. The set of sentences constructed by the author – which results from his/her subjective operation of representing ideal contents originating in his/her experience – constitute the work. By means of an intentional subjective operation, the author actualizes elements (words) which signify corresponding ideal contents, so that the sentences are not ideas but formations (Gestaltungen), pure objects of the author's representation. The work has its identity and uniqueness, and a heteronymous essence. Ontologically, it is something different from the mind of the author who creates it, and from the mind of the reader who interprets it and draws his/her own image from it (concretization).

A literary work is a single entity but it comprises several heterogeneous strata and layers, each of which has its own distinctive features and role. The most important levels are the following.

1. **Stratum of text and of sound forms.** This is the material of the work, its external form. It concerns the choice of the words and sentences that convey meaning and represent the constitutive part of the literary work on which all the other levels depend.

2. **Stratum of meaning.** This stratum has several layers.
   2.1 **Layer of meaning units.** This first layer comprises the meaning of words and sentences. It does not have autonomous essence: its origin and essence depend on conscious subjective operations performed by the author. Through his/her choice of words the author partially actualizes his/her ideas by formulating part of the material and formal content. The composition of the sentence introduces a meaning additional to those of the individual words, and it represents an intentional and functional unity. As a purely intentional expression it has a dual structure, which comprises the fact described and, more broadly, the ideal content represented. Characteristic of the literary work are quasi-judgements (Quasi-Urteil), statements that are only apparently true and which stand in opposition to true judgements (Urteil), which are statements which meet the truth criterion typical of the scientific work.

2.2. **Layer of represented objectivities.** This next stage in the acquisition of meaning enables the production of an image broader than that described. The
represented objectivities include, in fact, both ideal contents intentionally represented by the author by means of words and sentences, and whatever is acquired through properties, not expressed but possessed, of the things persons and facts cited. These properties constitute a background whose boundaries cannot be determined. This layer seeks to identify which level of reality is appropriate for the quasi-judgements by taking account of the place and time of representation. The presence of these phenomena accounts for the impossibility of achieving complete understanding of the work, which will only ever appear partially: hence the presence of points of ‘indeterminacy’ in the represented objectivity.

2.3. *Layer of schematized images.* This expresses the capacity of the work to bring out schemes of images that the author wants to exhibit: figures used in historical language, metaphors and similes. Schematized images confer a visibility wanted in a particular way on the object represented. The facts present in the images do not concern what the object is (its essence) but what it seems. The images have their own aesthetic values which are part of the work’s general aesthetic value.

5. **Features shared by the two theories**

The spread of the two theories with their similarities and differences led to heated polemic between their propounders. From a scientific point of view, however, convergence of thought is “regarded as highly significant. When several researchers working independently obtain similar results, it is reasonable to assume that there is some accuracy in their theories” (Poli, 1998, p. 206). Therefore, in order to identify the ontological characteristics of the literary work, we shall seek to show the most evident similarities between the two theories.

1. **Conception of a literary work.** A literary work is an object: that is, something in itself, something that is created and which once created no longer depends on its creator. It is representation as such: only subsequently does what has been represented emerge. Neither Hartmann nor Ingarden deny the presence of either the author, who transmits his/her feelings and thoughts by creating, or that of the perceiving subject. But the work exists as an object with representative content independently of the psychological aspect of subjects. This also applies to the author who has created it, for the existence of the work began at the moment when the author finished creating it. The work has heteronymous nature.

1. **Levels.** Both theories are based on the concept of levels and of a plurality of strata and layers as constituting the structure of a literary work. They express an autonomous and definitive reality, within the unity of which it is possible to distinguish the elements that constitute it.

2. **Materiality.** Hartmann’s *Vordergrund* corresponds to Ingarden’s stratum of the text and sound forms: it is this that gives form to the object and transmits the content of the work.

3. **The concept of background.** The two philosophers often use terms whose meanings sometimes coincide and sometimes differ. The term background, which is of particular importance in both theories, does not denote the same concept. For Hartmann it is the stratum counterposed to materiality and it possesses its own structure. In Ingarden’s represented objectivation, it is the ‘obscure part’ which remains outside the ‘light cone’ of the meaning of the words, and belongs to
a particular layer.

4. *The poverty of word content.* In different ways, both authors emphasise the limitedness of the meaning of words, and of the literary text in general, compared to the deeper-lying and ideal images that are present.

5. *Object and subject.* Because a literary work has a very high level of ideality, represented by the author and grasped by the reader, the theory which attributed subjectivity to the literary work used to prevail. Hartmann and Ingarden’s ontological interpretation rejects this theory by justifying the existence of both an object, in which the ideality is represented, and of subjects, one which it represents and others that interpret it. The fact that the reader is able to see and interpret does not gainsay the presence of the intentional and functional object.

6. **Comparison between the theories and the conclusions of the thesaurus**

   We shall finally seek to show the similarities between Hartmann’s and Ingarden’s theories and the conclusions drawn from our work on the thesaurus.

   Our conception of a literary work as an object that express the literary fact corresponds to that present in both theories. The literary fact represents the meaning, in fact the literary fact ideally comprises everything that concerns the content of the work, its spiritual and aesthetic values but also the forms of the work, because these too are an expression of the author. The external dimension represents the materiality. Nevertheless the material in our conception regarded work as final product including its publication, support, etc., materiality of the theories identifies what is written by the author.

   For this reason the external dimension does not emerge in the thesaurus structure. We focused our attention only on the literary fact which suggested solutions to structure problems. Terms relative to *grammatical analysis* and *linguistic analysis*, to *verse theory* and *prose theory*, did not refer to the text as the materiality of the work but rather to expressive values. Terms like *unfinished work*, *unpublished work*, *first edition* belonging to the category ‘object’ and structured ‘according to final production’ concerned the way in which the literary fact was presented (see section 2). As regards terms referring to constitutive parts of a work’s form (*introduction, preface, prologue, text*) our point of view was very closed to that of Ingarden’s. He declares the non-existence of the beginning, parts and end of a literary work: elements which he considers to be temporal spaces. Ingarden sees the ordering into parts of a work as a succession of phases in the unfolding of the story, or in other words, as a sequence with which to build the structure of the work.

   Terms relating to other categories of the thesaurus evidence a deeper level of content. These terms are those which concern the main theme of the work, the elements highlighted by criticism, features of the literary movement and phenomenon, the physical person/literary work relationship (author, mediator, reader).

   The ‘indeterminacy’ of the literary work posited by Ingarden was also borne in mind when compiling the thesaurus. The effort to interpret the literary fact is continuous. Every form of interpretation brings to light diverse aspects of the literary fact, which in their turn are subject to the further study that drives the search for interpretation. It has been pointed out that interpretation proceeds both horizontally, with perception of the work’s content by several readers, and
vertically when increasingly more extensive images overlap with previous ones. A crucial role in this latter form of interpretation is played by literary criticism, to which the thesaurus devotes particular attention.

We conclude with two observations: 1) the foregoing discussion is only an outline of the many stimuli for reflection that arise from the thought of Hartmann and Ingarden. Their works are a 'mine' of knowledge about not only works of art but also every form of writing in general; 2) the two theories enabled us to develop the ontological knowledge yielded by application of the 'systematifier' model. We believe that seeking to understand the profundity of the two theories, grasping their validity, and showing their topicality, having had the simple experience of classifying indexed terms, demonstrates the robustness of the ontological model used, the principles of which suggested the concept of an ontology of the literary work.

Notes
1. The term 'level' refers to both 'layer' and 'stratum'. Layer identifies overforming relationship, where overforming means that every category can constitute the 'matter' of a higher category. Stratum identifies building-above relationship, where building-above denotes that the higher stratum requires the lower one only as its external basis of existential support, but not as matter to be supraformed. (Poli, 2001, p.124)

References


Hartmann, Nicolai. (1966). Ästhetik. Berlin: de Gruyter


