



Yi-Ping Ong  
*The Art of Being:*  
*Poetics of the Novel and Existentialists*  
*Philosophy*

Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018, 298 pp.

At the very end of *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004 [1998]), the French literary scholar and intellectual Antoine Compagnon writes that «to study literature, you must take sides, decide on an approach, for the various methods do not complement each other and eclecticism leads nowhere. The *critical stance*, the knowledge of problematic hypotheses that govern our procedures, is vital» (2004: 197). Compagnon takes on the demon of theory from a philosophical perspective – a perspective that within the American, analytic philosophical tradition is commonly associated with so-called ‘critical theory’. To be brief, even at the cost of generalizing for the sake of argument, usually, in the United States, contemporary Western philosophers are studied by literary theorists in comparative literature, English, and modern language programs: just to give a couple of notable examples, Jacques Derrida is usually associated with *French Theory*, whereas Giorgio Agamben is part of the recent, yet promising and significant, *Italian Thought* trend. On the other hand, in American Philosophy Departments, it is rare to find undergraduate or even graduate classes on Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* (1967) or Agamben’s *Homo sacer* (1995), not to mention Martin Heidegger and other existentialist or phenomenological thinkers – which is probably a good thing.

Comparative literature scholars trained in the U.S. tend – I have to say, quite successfully – to work on comparative, global, and literary



theoretical issues from this 'critical' orientation: a recent, though 'old' example, is Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), whose main argument on the Western lyric poetry tradition is rooted within the debate around deconstruction that happened between the late 1960s and the early 1980s; Derrida and De Man, among others, were and are still perceived by Culler as primarily literary theory scholars, whose works embrace formal and aesthetic elements of literary discourse, which allowed him to develop his own 'apostrophe' theory to describe the transhistorical and performative nature of lyric poetry.

On the opposite side stands Yi-Ping Ong's *The Art of Being. Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy: her critical stance*, to use Compagnon's words, resides within the intersection between the continental and the analytic philosophical traditions, in that her theoretical account of the novel aims to establish an aesthetic and ethical relationship between literature and existentialism to outline an existentialist poetics of realism *in* the novel that «makes possible to discern and ascribe critical importance to various strategies for portraying characterological freedom, worldhood, and detotalized aesthetic form» (237).

Compared to previous attempts at establishing a relation between literature and existentialist philosophy by means of thematic and allegorical themes (death, human freedom, angst), or through a description of how philosophy influenced an author's thought – not to mention philological and intertextual exercises with philosophical writers, such as Sartre and Camus – Ong's book is original both in terms of methodology as well as in terms of close and 'distant' readings, for she is specifically concerned with the philosophical significance of specific forms, modes, and genres. By «developing an account of the impact of [existentialist philosophers'] discovery upon our understanding of the form of the novel and of the narrative strategies», Ong studies how «novels draw their readers into the fictional reality of the lives and worlds they represent» (23) by seeking to answer two correlated questions: what is a novel? and what can a novel do? Her goal, therefore, does not only pertain the domain of literary criticism, in which her book stands as a groundbreaking piece of scholarship, but

also – and foremost – in the domain of ethical discourse, for her understanding of the novel by means of existentialist philosophy considers narrative form as a privileged channel of self-knowledge and understanding of the world: «*The Art of Being* [...] recasts the problematization of aesthetic totalization from the perspective of the demands of first-person authority over existence, thus addressing from a new perspective an aspect of novelistic poetics that has long been debated» (34).

If, on the one hand, human existence is understood by means of literary forms, likewise, literary forms are understood from the point of view of existence: «Only by unfolding the implications of this encounter do we discover the power of literary form to shape philosophical expression» (242). Ong's project revolves around an enrichment of the dialectic between existentialism and realism that has characterized much of the theory of the novel of the twentieth and twenty-first century («from Auerbach to Lukács to Mazzoni», 241). Ong's book requires a deep knowledge of the current theoretical debates around the novel in order to understand what her horizons are and where this book is located, for a chapter – or a long section – dedicated to this topic is missing, especially in the introductory part. I am particularly sympathetic to the continental tradition to which Ong refers (Erich Auerbach, György Lukács, and Guido Mazzoni, but also Franco Moretti), but the theory of the novel from the 1960s to today has developed models that, though not always convincing (and sometimes overly politically ideologized), would have deserved a greater discussion or problematization in the book—which Ong sometimes does, though not consistently. On the other hand, *The Art of Being* is a book for an audience of specialists, and this lack certainly does not undermine the overall value of Ong's work.

If, as explained so far, her theoretical account and methodology are highly innovative and offer a new perspective on literary forms (not merely on the novel alone), her close readings display the intertwined aspects of the novelistic work of art: the existential, philosophical, and aesthetic. The philosophers at the core of *The Art of Being* are, among others, Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Martin

Heidegger, and Albert Camus, whose works are central for the philosophical investigation of the novel and its aesthetic and formal development between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in the works of Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, Henry James, Émile Zola, and Lev Tolstoy. From this list, which names only some of the figures along the complex spectrum of literary, theoretical, and philosophical texts tackled by Ong, it is clear that *The Art of Being* does not try to trace a genetic relationship between literature and philosophy, but rather aims to verify how the dialectic between literary thought and philosophical thought between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries allows us to understand the immersive power of classic realist novels.

Building from Kierkegaard's *From the Papers of One Still Living, Published against His Will*, Sartre's *François Mauriac and Freedom*, and Beauvoir's *Literature and Metaphysics*, in chapter 1 (*Toward an Existentialist Poetics of the Novel*), Ong develops her argument around the notion of what she calls the «life-view» of the novelist and around the aesthetic elements of novelistic representations (characterological freedom and self-consciousness). Although the chapter follows a quite mechanical analysis (Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Beauvoir), Ong's aesthetic understanding of the form of the novel successfully merges each account of the existentialist structure of narration by those philosophers around one main philosophical paradox: that, at the same time, the novel must «establish its manifest autonomy *qua* artwork» and «convince the reader of the independent existence of its characters, to the point that the aesthetic boundary separating reader from novel virtually vanishes, giving rise to the effect of immersive inhabitation within the fictional reality of the characters' lives and world» (90). According to Ong, therefore, the existence of the novel itself depends upon «the fiction of the nonexistence of the novel's reader» (17).

In the nineteenth-century novel – but one may argue that it is equally true within the entire novel tradition – this philosophical paradox provokes readers to actively react to the realist lives that these novel represent, to the point that they create a new perspective on fictional worlds that is «completely other than the perspective that we

ordinarily have upon what is represented» (192). That is: in realist novels, the above-mentioned philosophical paradox becomes both aesthetic *and* epistemic – which is also a dimension that readers experience within the modernist tradition. Though chapter one organizes the overall structure of the book of the following three chapters around this constant dialectic between aesthetic and epistemic, historically it fails to fully explain how this philosophical paradox differs (if it does) from the post-19<sup>th</sup> century novel tradition, which at a point Ong calls ‘existential’: as she writes, «This brief and schematic outline of the history of the incomplete in aesthetic thought prior to modernism can thus be divided into three phases: classical, Romantic, and existential» (205).

Nonetheless, this lack of historical comprehension of literary forms, which is the risk of any interdisciplinary understanding of artwork, does not at all undermine Ong’s argument concerning the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel. In chapters 2, 3 and 4, Ong exhaustively examines the relation between the novel and philosophy through the novel’s representation of freedom, worldhood, and detotalized aesthetic form. What is most interesting in this respect is the correlation she draws between narrative tools and philosophical concepts within the aesthetic domain, for the «very possibility of the novel achieving the status of a convincing work of art depends upon the resolution of the problem» (151): freedom and marriage (chapter 2); situations and being-in-the-world (chapter 3); unfinished narratives and unfinished thought (chapter 4). Both the narrative tools and the philosophical concepts work towards a better understanding of 19<sup>th</sup>-century European literature in terms of aesthetic and forms, but they also function as stylistic clues for Ong in order to offer a new account of the type of novel she works on.

As she claims in chapter 2, «in the encounter between characterological freedom and the calculated destiny of plot, one must dominate: either the progress of the narrative is determined by the contingency of individual free choice, or the fiction of individual agency is merely a narrative pawn to be discarded once the ultimate plot structure is established in its entirety» (92). To which follows the question: what is the meaning of Isabel’s choice in *The Portrait of a Lady*?

Through Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843), *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Ong elucidates a series of dialectical shifts that generate narrative structure, which so far have been either ignored or overlooked in James's novel. In this sense, agency and selfhood are expressions of Isabel's single commitment that readers are called to acknowledge in their reading and progressive understanding of the plot: «How can an aesthetic representation convince the reader of the reality of a 'particular point of view on the world and on oneself»—how can it convey, without falsification, the existential condition of 'unfinalizability' in which the authority of self-knowledge rests?» (101).

In other words: What does it mean, again, *to choose* and how does Isabel's agency affect us? Or, to pick up another decisive philosophical question that is at the core of chapter 3, can the world-disclosure in the realist novel can be understood as an achievement of the novelistic work of art by which a world is paradoxically rendered comprehensible to a nonexisting subject from the point of view of an existing subject within?» (153). How does the being-in-the-world of the novel impact the existence of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and, so to speak, our reader-response to her actions? And, finally: what does it mean «to understand one's own life as a work in progress» (193) in Balzac's *Œuvre*?

These issues are central to both existentialist thought and the novel, and this set of philosophical questions expands and to some extent overcomes what literary theory aims to do in order to respond to the narrative and theoretical elements raised by the novel: a philosophical understanding of narrative theory (plot) and forms (characters), as well as totality (the representation of modern life) by means of existentialism, unveils «insights into the philosophical meaning and aesthetic aims of novelistic conventions for portraying existence, reorienting us to aspects of novelistic form that dominant paradigms of realism pass over» (236). In Isabel's decision to marry Osmond or Dorothea's to marry Will Ladislaw, the ethical commitment goes beyond the ethically and socially conventional manifestations of duty in the eyes of both characters and readers; the actions become, indeed, an ethical stage of self-affirmation, a form of freedom as an autonomy of the will that defines the epistemic

horizon of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novels and lays the foundations for the genre's modernist evolution in the early twentieth century.

A similar condition comes to be when the range of action of the character is read through its existence in the novelistic world in relation to our own existence in the world, for «the world of the novel is both a world as seen and experienced by an 'other-self' (the character, not the reader *qua* concrete center of agency) and a world viewed by Nobody (the reader-made-believer in the reality of the character, no longer herself existing)» (153), so that the trope of entering into another world would give meaning and existence to the narrative situations experienced by Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. Finally, incompleteness – the *Dasein*'s «lack of totality» (202) – is displayed in the existentialist meditation on the unfinished form of our lives in the work of art, when, for example, Austin's Emma understands on a meta-narrative level that she has no authority to determine her or another person's life choices.

Where does this lead us? Where do we stand as readers towards this existential reading of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novels? More could be said about the comparative maps Ong built through the book and about the relationship she established between aesthetic, narrative, and philosophical categories, especially for the ways in which she considers *stricto sensu* existential and/or existentialist authors such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger. At any case, what *Art of Being* brilliantly does is to challenge literary criticism and shed light on a new methodology in order to understand literary texts, genre theory and aesthetic forms: «by unfolding the implications of the encounter [between literature and philosophy] we discover the power of literary form to shape philosophical expression» (242).

## L'autore

### Alberto Comparini

Alberto Comparini (Ph.D., Stanford University) è ricercatore di Critica letteraria e letterature comparate all'Università degli Studi di Trento, dove si occupa di poesia lirica e di teoria del romanzo. Tra le sue principali pubblicazioni ricordiamo le monografie *La poetica dei «Dialoghi con Leucò» di Cesare Pavese* (Mimesis 2017, premio Pavese 2018), *Geocritica e poesia dell'esistenza* (Mimesis 2018) e *Un genere letterario in diacronia. Forme e metamorfosi del dialogo nel Novecento* (Fiorini 2018), e la curatela *Ovid's Metamorphoses in Twentieth-Century Italian Literature* (Winter Verlag 2018).

Email: [alberto.comparini@unitn.it](mailto:alberto.comparini@unitn.it)

## La recensione

Data invio: 09/04/2020

Data accettazione: 20/04/2020

Data pubblicazione: 30/05/2020

## Come citare questa recensione

Comparini, Alberto, "Yi-Ping Ong, *The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialists Philosophy*", *Le culture del dissenso in Europa nella seconda metà del Novecento*, Eds. C. Pieralli - T. Spignoli, *Between*, X.19 (2020), [www.betweenjournal.it](http://www.betweenjournal.it)