

*Stinson 1/20/14*

published in Eldridge, Richard (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2009).

# LITERATURE AND KNOWLEDGE

John Gibson,  
University of Louisville

## I INTRODUCTION

It is common to claim that in works of literature we find some of the most powerful representations of reality our culture has to offer. This claim is central to the general humanistic conception of the value of the literary work of art: it is at least partly in the business of revealing to readers something of consequence about the nature of their shared world. According to this view, the literary perspective (and the artistic perspective more generally) is the definitive *human* perspective: the standpoint from which we are best able to bring to light the range of values, desires, frustrations, experiences, and practices that define the human situation. On this view, works of literature, at least when they live up to their promise, represent cognitive achievements: they embody ways of *knowing* the world.

But in developing a literary tradition, we have come to devise a rather curious way of going about revealing our world. As the saying goes, literature is 'the book of life'. And what is curious, simply put, is that when we open this book we find it to be filled with *fictions*. That works of imaginative literature – the sort of literature I shall discuss here – speak about the fictional rather than the real is hardly news. To be sure, one would think that literature's use of the creative imagination constitutes rather than refutes its claim to cognitive value: it is the tool with which literature builds its vision of our world. But the challenge the philosopher of literature faces is one of explaining just how this may be. How is it, exactly, that a textual form which speaks of fictions can tell us something of consequence about reality? Why is it that we have come to find that writing about fictions can be a powerful way of opening up a window on our world? We tend to think that it can be, of course. But as with all philosophical challenges, explaining this with a respectable degree of sophistication turns out to be a difficult affair.

The problem runs deeper than literature's interest in the imaginary and the unreal. It is not only that when we look between the covers of a novel we find descriptions of fictions. We also notice a conspicuous absence of all those tools, devices, and techniques we commonly take to be essential to the search for truth and knowledge: argumentation, the offering of evidence, the setting forth of 'the facts', the proffering of premises, the derivation of conclusions, and so on (see Stolnitz 1992; John 1998; Lamarque & Olsen 1995; Diffey 1998). Needless to say, the ways in which works of history,

philosophy, and science – paradigm cases of works of *inquiry* – make use of these devices and techniques varies considerably. It may even be the case that they are all, like literature, irreducibly narratological in form – this is a fairly popular claim in contemporary postmodern culture (see White 1978; Fish 1980). But works of inquiry weave their narratives in ways very unlike literature, and it is the particular way a narrative is woven that makes the difference here. Literature standardly constructs *fictional* narratives that have *dramatic* structures; works of inquiry standardly attempt to construct *factual* narratives that have *argumentative* (or evidentiary) structures. This would seem an important difference. And the challenge is to show that literary works can have a claim to cognitive value *in the absence* of those features of writing commonly taken to be the stuff of the pursuit of knowledge. For in their absence, precisely what aspect of literary works do we point toward that justifies treating them as players in the pursuit of knowledge? What do we find *in* works of literature that even entitles us to think that they wish to be read for knowledge? Again, we tend to think that there is something, but identifying precisely what is the challenge.

It is also now generally understood that to call into question the view of literary works as vehicles of knowledge is not thereby to embrace a form of literary philistinism, namely the picture of literary works as entertaining but ultimately trivial playthings. Since the rise of various brands of literary formalism and aestheticism in the past century, philosophers and literary theorists have done much to show that there is a powerful alternative to this so-called ‘cognitivist’ tradition of speaking about literature, one which has an equal claim to being a defense of the value of literature. Philosophers and literary theorists of an anti-cognitivist bent do not deny that literary representations are very often profound, perceptive, awe-inspiring, and so forth. The thought is rather that while we will have a very hard time accounting for this profundity (etc.) in cognitive terms – say a profundity of *insight* – it is altogether easy to do so in *aesthetic* terms. It is also likely more natural, for literary works are, after all, artworks. Indeed, an aesthetic view of literature can even urge that it is to commit what Gilbert Ryle would call a category error to try to account for the value of literary representations in cognitive terms: it amounts to a silly desire to carry over to aesthetic domains terms meant to account for the value of representations in philosophical and scientific domains.

Whether or not one quite agrees with this, it does have a certain intuitive appeal. For we have a vocabulary that works perfectly well for talking about artworks – an aesthetic vocabulary – and it is not altogether ridiculous to think that to apply the vocabulary we use to account for the value of works of inquiry also to literature is simply to misunderstand the nature of what we are talking about. At any rate, the possibility of offering a fully aesthetic theory of literature marks the presence of a more direct, and certainly less challenging, way to account for the value of literature. It is hard to imagine a literary cognitivist who has not at one time felt its appeal, who hasn’t at least for a moment thought that she may have taken the wrong route to arrive at her defence of the value of literature.

This is the challenge I shall address in this chapter. I hope to give a sense of how powerful the arguments against the cognitivist view of literature are but also to bring to light how the

philosopher beholden to it might respond to them. More precisely, I shall argue that we must accept that literature's particular manner of engaging with reality is *sui generis*, so much so in fact that it constitutes its own form of cognitive insight. This implies, among other things, that we abandon what we might call the *philosophy-by-other-means* view of literature, and in general any defence of literary cognitivism that attempts to model literature on a theory of how *other* sorts of texts can have cognitive value (say by showing them to mimic philosophical works, perhaps by being a thought experiment in literary disguise, a sort of dramatic 'proof', an exercise in moral reasoning by example, and other like things we in no obvious sense find when we look inside the majority of literary works). I also hope to show that literature's cognitive achievements are intimately bound up with its aesthetic achievements. The humanist need not turn her back to the aesthetic dimension of literary works when defending the cognitive value she believes many of them store. Rather, the humanist must embrace it, for it is here that literary works effect their particular enlightenment.

Before beginning, one should notice that the debate on the cognitive value of literature does not concern a mere epistemological puzzle. It begins with this; but it brings something much more important to the attention of the philosopher of literature. It opens up a discussion of the general *cultural* significance of the literary work of art. Perhaps the issue of whether literary works can offer a precise sort of knowledge is not even what is really at stake in this debate. In asking whether works of literature can offer knowledge, we are asking to have the *worldly* interest we take in art vindicated. What is at stake here is our ability to articulate what amounts to a satisfactory account of the interplay of art and life itself. I shall not be attempting anything as grand as this here. But I do hope that what I say about the epistemological issue will give a sense of how one can use it as a tool for exploring the variety of ways in which literature and life take an interest in one another.

## II THE TEXTUAL CONSTRAINT

It should be confessed that there are any number of things we can learn from works of imaginative literature, though many are trivial and of little literary relevance. From a master stylist I might learn how to write with wit and grace; from an Elizabethan drama I can gain insight into the English of an older age; from a novel of dazzling inventiveness I can acquire knowledge of possibilities of description and conceptualization. The list is nearly endless. If the problem of literary cognitivism were simply one of identifying something – *anything* – we can learn from literature, it would be a very dull debate, for it is impossible to imagine how one could fail to arrive at a positive response to the problem. But the challenge is not merely to find a way of showing that we can leave our literary encounters with 'more information,' so baldly put. We do, in countless ways. Rather, the challenge is to reveal literary works *themselves* to have as one of their goals the offering of a form of understanding, and this is a quite different and much more difficult matter. The claim to cognitive acquisition on the part of a reader is of little literary relevance if not tethered to a complementary claim to the effect that what the reader has learnt is a lesson the literary work actually puts on offer.

It is only in this sense that the question is a proper *literary* one; that is, a question that stands to reveal something about the nature of the literary work of art.

This is not always appreciated as it should be. One finds much ink spilt on how works of literature might help improve our faculty of imagination (Currie 1998; Harold 2003), develop our cognitive skills (Novitz 1987), discover what we would think, feel, or value if in another's shoes (Walton 1997; Currie 1998), become more sympathetic and adept moral reasoners (Nussbaum 1995), and so on. These are genuine cognitive achievements, and literature can certainly help us in our pursuit of them. But, like the above examples, they tend to say too much about readers and too little about literary works. Since literary works are for obvious reasons rarely *about* the imagination, cognitive skills, or emotions of their readers, to gesture towards these things in an attempt to defend the thesis of literary cognitivism is to gesture towards the wrong thing. The question is primarily textual: it concerns the nature of the literary, of what we find of cognitive significance when we look *inside* a literary work. It is only about readers – about the ways in which their minds and morals can be improved through their encounters with literature – in a secondary, derivative sense.

Consider a classics student who, having been asked to read Plato's *Symposium*, returns to his teacher and claims to have learnt much from it. The teacher asks the student to explain exactly what he has learnt, to which he replies, 'a considerable amount of Attic Greek and some fine metaphors for drunkenness.' He very well may have learnt this – one can find all of this in Plato's dialogue – and he might be all the better for it. But naturally the teacher will think that the student has missed the point of the assignment. The student has learnt something, but he has not learnt it from Plato. This is because what he claims to have learnt makes no reference at all to what we might describe as the *cognitive labour* of Plato's dialogue, to the lesson it wishes to impart, to the insight it struggles to articulate – assuming as I am that Plato intends in that dialogue to illuminate the nature of love and not the grammar of Attic Greek or our capacity to speak in metaphors. Indeed, the student's response fails to show an *understanding* of the text, which is what we expect a claim of cognitive acquisition to reveal.

Likewise, responses to the problem of literary cognitivism which put all of the emphasis on how readers might become more successful imaginers, emoters, and reasoners are in the end much more sophisticated versions of the mistake of the classics student. It is valuable to have accounts of how engagements with the literary affect readers in morally and intellectually positive ways. We do live in a culture in which art is at times thought to be of no more significance than its ability to amuse, and these accounts do much to counter literary philistinism of this brand. But as a response to the question of whether literary works themselves have cognitive aspirations, they are not very satisfying. In fact, they are largely silent on this matter.

It is true, as Berys Gaut argues, that we are able 'to apply the imaginative world of the fiction to the real world, and thereby to discover truths about the world' (Gaut 2006: 123). We do this often when moved by a work. We turn from it and find ourselves now capable of seeing the world in its light, and this can be an important source of cognitive insight. After we read George

Eliot's *Middlemarch* or Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, for example, we can identify all the Casaubons and Falstaffs who inhabit our world. These characters are, in their proper literary mode of presentation, creatures of pure fiction and so without any intrinsic cognitive value. But we can use these characters as tools for approaching reality, treating them as lenses through which we can attempt to perceive human character more clearly. This, in turn, can open up a way of acquiring truths about human nature, of coming to discover something about it. But while this may be a significant feature of what we do with literary works, it is not a particularly good strategy for a defense of literary cognitivism. If the acquisition of truth depends on the reader *applying* aspects of a fictional world to the real one, then presumably that truth is not given expression in the work itself, and so the work cannot quite put it on offer. We may come to learn about the world when we do what Gaut claims we do. But we haven't quite come to learn about the world *from literature*. And this is what we want answered: can literature itself record, document, or bear witness to something about our cognitive relation to reality? We miss the point if we try to explain this by describing ways in which readers rather than literary works perform all the cognitive labour here. \*

This is a problem with many popular versions of the so-called 'propositional theory' of literary cognitivism (for a discussion of its history, see Lamarque & Olsen 1995). In an influential and clever defense of this, Peter Kivy writes:

Now if one thinks, as I do, that part of the reader's literary appreciation consists in confirming and disconfirming for himself the general thematic statements he perceives in fictional works he reads, sometimes unaided, sometimes through the help of literary critics, one will see why it is quite compatible with the Propositional Theory that such confirmation and disconfirmation are part of *appreciation*, and that *appreciation* is the job, if I may so put it, of the reader, not the critic *qua* critic. The critic's job, *qua* critic, is, among other things, to make available to the reader whatever hypothesis the fictional work may, directly or indirectly, propose. It is the reader's job to appreciate them, in part by confirming or disconfirming them for himself. (Kivy 1997: 125; see also New 2000: 116-120)

When we find ourselves struck by a literary representation, we tend to find a *suggestion* in it, a clue as to how we may view the real world. Though the characters we find in a literary work are fictional, the particular ways in which an author invests their lives with meaning, their actions with urgency, their relationships with consequence, always suggest to the reader a way of regarding actual human affairs. The production of these visions and suggestions is typically a matter of literature's thematic rendering of its subject, say the way in which a certain work configures 'suffering', 'jealousy', or 'joy' as *this* sort of experience. Through the force of its thematic representation of a region of human concern, literature is able to hold up for appreciation a finely wrought *vision* of human experience and circumstance. And we tend to have an interest in subjecting these visions to cognitive scrutiny, in asking whether our world is *really* like that, or whether it would be better if it were. Much of this is surely right, and to this extent positions such as Kivy's capture an important dimension of our appreciation of literary works.

Note, however, that Kivy (and this line of thought more generally) accepts that literary themes are of no intrinsic cognitive significance. To build the bridge to truth, we have to engage in an activity that is rather suspicious from the literary point of view. We (or the critic) must *convert* a literary theme into a philosophical claim, a 'hypothesis' – this is the act of rendering a theme in propositional form – which we can then go on to scrutinize for truth (say by casting the representation of jealousy in *Othello* in terms of a claim to the effect that 'jealousy can destroy what we hold most dear'). If this is so, it is hard not to be left with the feeling that the process of conversion that is the mechanism of cognitive acquisition here illicitly replaces literary content with philosophical content, and that in so doing, it moves the object of appreciation from the text to what is ultimately outside it. We do not in any literal sense find these 'hypotheses' in literary works, and thus our appreciation of these hypotheses, though occasioned by our encounters with the literary, cannot itself be properly literary. When we convert a theme into the form of a hypothesis (or proposition), we are already at one remove from the work; and when we begin scrutinizing this hypothesis for truth, we soon find ourselves at a second. And it seems clear that the labour put into forging the connection to truth is, again, performed almost entirely by the reader rather than the work, and thus we face the old problem.

What these reflections bring to view is a basic constraint on what can count as a response to the problem of literary cognitivism. We might call it the 'textual constraint' and treat it as telling us that a satisfactory account of a proper feature of a literary work requires that whatever property we attribute to a text – say the property of being cognitively valuable – be an actual property *of* the text: something we come into contact with when we explore the interior of the work. It must be a part of its *content*, broadly construed. So if a certain point or insight is not *in* the work, then, according to this textual constraint, we cannot claim to have learnt that point from the work. Of course, novels, at least good ones, make us think. But the important question from the literary standpoint is *what* we think about when we think about a work. And if it is something not quite in the work, then that something cannot be invoked to explain a value *of* that work. If we fail to respect this, we are ignoring the text, much as the student of Plato ignored Plato. We are merely commenting on how we can enlist the text in our personal intellectual pursuits and ultimately saying nothing about how the literary work of art itself might embody knowledge of the world.

### III THE LOSS OF THE WORLD

It is here that the problem begins to take the form of a proper philosophical challenge. According to the textual constraint, we must limit our search for cognitive value to the work itself, looking inside rather than away from it. And what we find is that virtually all the resources contemporary philosophy has given us for describing the 'inside' of literary works appear to make impossible the claim that we can find in them something sufficiently real to give support to the thesis of literary cognitivism.

Prior to the twentieth century, the tradition of broadly humanistic philosophizing about art – beginning with Aristotle and extending through the German and English Romantic traditions – was canonical, though always with the occasional detractor. When philosophers spoke of art, there was, in addition to compulsory observations on the nature of beauty and other aesthetic features of art, almost always an important word offered on art's general cultural significance, on the ways in which works of art articulate an insight into our capacity to achieve freedom, attain moral selfhood, reveal the universal implicit in the particular, find meaning in a world without much of a point, and so forth (see Davis 1996; Weston 2001).

But when philosophy took its initial steps toward the so-called 'linguistic turn' of the last century, discussions of the nature of literature began to focus on the semantic and referential features of literary language rather than on its power of cultural articulation, and a very different habit of speaking about literature began to emerge in philosophical circles. Perhaps the decisive first step in this shift was Gottlieb Frege's 1892 publication of *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* ('On Sense and Reference'), in which we find claim that:

In hearing an epic poem we are [...] interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for the attitude of scientific investigation. Hence it is a matter of no concern for us whether the name 'Odysseus' has reference, so long as we accept the poem as a work of art. (Frege 1970: 63)

What we find announced here is a view of the language of literary works that has the consequence of severing whatever internal connection we once thought might exist between literary works and extra-literary reality. Works of imaginative literature retain the 'sense' of our terms and thus the words we find in them preserve their standard meanings. Literature and what we might call 'world-directed' texts (such as history texts, which attempt to refer to or otherwise represent reality) share the same language, generally put; they both participate in the same *Sinn*. But literary language stays on the level of *Sinn*, whereas in its standard (empirical) uses, language takes the extra step of applying these words to the actual world. Thus literature is, if not quite self-referential, at least not interested in referring to anything real, to anything beyond itself. And if this is so, then, as Frege puts it, the 'question of truth', central to so much of the humanist tradition, is barred from our appreciation of literature.

There are few Fregeans around today, at least in literary aesthetics, but the very general orientation towards literature we find in *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* is still with us. Frege's view of literature as a sort of pure 'sense' language has not aged well. (In fact, it may not even be Frege's view, since it is often argued that there can be no genuine sense without reference on Frege's model; but this is how contemporary literary aesthetics has received him.) Literature does, on many views, have truth and reference, just of a rather deviant sort. What we find in the tradition that arose after Frege is that the notions of truth and reference have been relocated to the *fictional* dimension of literature, in order to explain the ways in which works of literature function to generate and state

'truths' about fictional worlds. Thus these notions no longer serve the traditional humanistic purpose of marking the means by which literary works speak about reality. In this respect, while philosophers have recovered from Frege a notion of 'literary reference', the wedge Frege drove between literature and truth is very much still in place. The consequence of this is that literature is effectively made ||  
|| mute about the stirrings of extra-literary reality.

To give a sampling of prominent recent theories of fiction, in so-called speech-act approaches it is argued that writing a work of fiction is a form of non-deceptive pretence in which authors pretend to state as fact what is known to be untrue (Searle 1974-5; Beardsley 1981). In this sense, literature speaks, simply with a wink, about what is not, and so, while not in the business of telling lies, does not go about stating worldly truths. Or we find accounts that claim that literary works project a special class of *possible* worlds, namely fictional worlds (Lewis 1978; Pavel 1988; Doležel 1998). The problem of fiction in literature here becomes somewhat like the problem of counterfactuals in the philosophy of language, a matter of describing the mechanism that allows a writer to describe actions and events that never actually occurred (or allows a reader to understand statements made about them: how we are able to make truth-valued and referential statements about non-actual states of affairs, for example). And we have the extraordinarily influential 'make-believe' account of fiction (Walton 1990). Here it is argued that just as children use sticks and stones as swords and bombs in a game of make-believe, when adults read literature they use words in much the same way. We do not *believe* what we in read a work of imaginative fiction, since we cannot believe a sentence (or a text largely composed of sentences) we know is not true. But we can *make-believe* them, and so we treat the descriptions in a literary work as props for our imaginative involvement in the story line, using non-epistemic attitudes (such as 'imagining that') to ground the possibility of appreciating a fiction as a something though we know all the while that it is really nothing at all. (For a survey of contemporary theories of fiction, see David Davies 2000.)

One should notice that none of these theories proposes the patently absurd idea that works of imaginative literature speak exclusively about the imaginary and the unreal, a claim that would imply that when William Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* he invented not only Addie Bundren but also Mississippi, wagons, and death. The picture we get from these theories is that the bits and pieces of reality we find woven into works of fiction play a *non-epistemic* role in these works. They are used to give texture to the fictional world of the work rather than to represent or state truths about actual states of affairs. We do criticize a novel that uses (for example) New York as its setting yet fails to get straight the difference between Downtown and Uptown. But this is a critique of the setting's accuracy, and it is done along the lines in which we criticize a set in a play rather than an argument to the effect that the literary work attempts to make truth-claims about the world and fails in so doing. Saying so much – claiming that accuracy of worldly background and setting in works of imaginative fiction is straightforwardly truth-functional or referential – would be akin to saying that the set in a production of *A Street Car Named Desire* functioned to make truth-claims about New Orleans, which is plain silly.



What we find in this shift in twentieth century literary aesthetics from traditional humanistic concerns to an overriding interest in the logic and semantics of fictional discourse is that philosophy has developed a vocabulary for speaking about literature that has made it even more difficult to give sense to the thesis of literary cognitivism. There are other theories of fiction around than those just surveyed. But in virtually all of them we see a commitment to the old Fregean move of denying that literature has real-worldly truth and reference. The consequence of this is that it gives the air of nonsense to the idea that literary language might actually be able to tell us something of cognitive significance about the world. For if it does not speak about reality – if it sends its words and description to fictional rather than real addresses – how could it possibly be revelatory of reality? In this respect, the problem for the literary cognitivist is not merely that literary works refuse to use the tools of inquiry to build support for their claims, as discussed above. *Literature does not even make claims*, so there is really nothing for it to support.

This is likely one of the reasons that attempts to defend literary cognitivism such as Gaut's and Kivy's are so prominent. At first glance the sort of insight they argue works of literature can offer may seem odd from the literary point of view, arguing as they do that readers rather than literary works perform the lion's share of cognitive labour. But given the notion of fiction with which so much contemporary philosophy operates, we can also see why moves such as theirs are so alluring. If what we have to say about literary fiction is that it concerns possible worlds, or that literary appreciation casts the content of literary works as an objects of make-believe, then the idea of finding reality disclosed *through* a literary work is made utterly mysterious. If this is so, then it appears obligatory to look outside the text to establish a connection with truth and knowledge.

So we arrive at the heart of the problem. According to the textual constraint, we *must* look within the work to ground literary cognitivism, and this seems to be precisely what we cannot do. Literary language has no declarative power, and thus it is not in the business of telling us about the nature of our world. It is true that works of fiction can embody a vision of aspects of human experience and circumstance: *Bartleby the Scrivener* is among the most potent representations we have of alienation, *Othello* of jealousy. But visions are, from the epistemic point of view, just that: mere pictures, representations of life that are often powerful, moving, even beautiful, but for all that cognitively neutral. Thus something outside the work must be invoked to build the bridge between these visions and worldly truth. But the moment we look outside the work to build this bridge, we have implicitly conceded the defeat of literary cognitivism. We might console ourselves by remarking on the ways in which we can enlist literary works in our extra-literary cognitive pursuits – as we saw in the last section, this is rather easy to do – and so we needn't fear that literary philistinism is a consequence of this. But given what philosophy tells us it means for a text to be fictional, for a use of language to be literary, it is hard indeed to see how we might give life to the thesis of literary cognitivism.

#### IV MOVING THE DEBATE AHEAD

Those of us who still feel drawn to the idea that literary works are sources of worldly illumination will likely think that in all of this something crucial has been left unmentioned, and that this something is essential to the thesis of literary cognitivism. I think that this is right, and for the remainder of this chapter I will try to identify just what this something is.

What should strike one as initially suspicious in the way the problem is set up in the debate is that it seems to make the case for literary cognitivism hang on whether we can apply to literature the vocabulary we have for explaining how works of inquiry illuminate reality. Though this is rarely made explicit by the major players in the debate, one does have a sense that the discussion gets afoot by looking at standard sorts of text with cognitive value – scientific, philosophical, etc. – and then going on to wonder whether literary works can do what they do, at least at some level and to some extent. This is a questionable way of approaching the matter. I assume that painting is a paradigm case of art. But I also assume that no sensible person, Kant excluded, would try to account for the artistic value of music by asking whether what we find in paintings can also be found in symphonies. We are likely guilty of a similar sin if we hear the question of whether literary works have cognitive value as asking us solely whether they can offer truth and knowledge. What I think we see in the above arguments for anti-cognitivism is the poverty of the vocabulary of truth and knowledge when applied to literature (for similar critiques see Lamarque & Olsen 1995; Lamarque 1996; Lamarque 2006). But perhaps the literary cognitivist does not need this vocabulary.

Yet what is meant by ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ here? What these anti-cognitivist arguments deny that the literary work possesses is a standard (and significant) sort of knowledge. This standard sort is often called ‘propositional’ or ‘conceptual’ knowledge, depending on the particular spin one gives it. If literature were able to offer us this sort of knowledge, then the story we should be able to tell about it would be something like the following. If we were to acquire what appears to be a potential candidate for knowledge from Dostoevsky’s presentation of (e.g.) suffering in *Notes from Underground*, then this work would in one way or another have to *assert* something about *what suffering is*. This would be done by offering a proposition – implicitly, in the case of literary works and artworks more generally – to the effect that suffering, or a species thereof, is ‘thus and such a thing’, say a condition of mind in which one’s world and one’s self appear at once alien and revolting. If this happened, we would then be given epistemic access to a new *concept* of suffering, or at any rate a refinement of the one we already possess. Literary works, however, lacking declarative power, and much else in addition, are not in business of articulating truths of this variety, and thus they cannot be (or do not wish to be) vehicles of the sort of propositional-conceptual knowledge tied to it.

In recent years there has been a steady proliferation of philosophers who have noticed that art has an important power to offer forms of insight which in no obvious way rest upon the proffering of knowledge of this standard sort, in fact which do not consist at all in the stating of truths about the way our world is. And this, I think, offers the literary cognitivist an important clue. Metaphors, as Ted Cohen has argued, can give expression to a new way of feeling and thinking about a familiar subject of human concern. When I offer you a successful metaphor, the metaphor

holds in place a certain cognitive and emotional *orientation* towards the world (rather than states a truth about it), and it thus functions to 'invite you to join a community with me, an intimate community whose bond is our common feeling about something.' (Cohen 2004: 236) Noël Carroll has argued that the ethical value of art is not a matter of its offering a body of moral knowledge but of its capacity to enrich the knowledge we already possess: 'in mobilizing what we already know and what we already feel, the narrative artwork can become an occasion for us to deepen our understanding of what we already know and feel.' (Carroll 1996: 142) And Richard Eldridge has argued at length for art's capacity to present to us 'materials about which we do not know exactly how to feel and judge.' (Eldridge 2005: 226) Artworks do not resolve this material – say a striking representation of a morally ambiguous practice – into a proposition that tells us *what* to feel and think about it. The force of their presentation of this material resides in the very act of working through it, for in so doing artworks bring to light the 'complex texture of our human lives.' (Eldridge 2005: 230) (For a similarly spirited accounts, see Graham 1995; John 2003; and Harrison 1991 as well as his contribution to this volume.)

There is much to admire in these positions. In each of them the insight is tied to an artwork's aesthetic and artistic handling of its content. Artworks, thus conceived, illuminate the world not by pausing from their artistic pursuits and mimicking a work of inquiry (say by arguing, acting as a thought experiment, dealing out claims about the nature of this or that). Rather, this illumination is inseparable from the metaphoric and narratological dimensions of artworks. These philosophers urge that if we look deep enough, we can discover a certain cognitive force *in* these features of art, which has the attractive consequence of showing us how to allow art to be just that yet find ground upon which to build an account of its cognitive value. Like Carroll, I want to argue that literature's cognitive value resides in its ability not to offer knowledge but rather to act upon the knowledge we already possess. And like Eldridge and Cohen, I want to claim that the form of insight we get from this concerns not truth, properly so-called, but a certain cognitive orientation toward the 'texture' of human experience and circumstance. Like all three, I hope to show that literature's ability to do this resides in the work itself, in the power of the visions of life it holds in place.

Before I can explain how this is so or precisely what this means, I need to introduce the sort of understanding I shall argue that literature is especially able to offer. The intuition I want to exploit is that there is much more to 'understanding' than the possession of knowledge of the propositional or conceptual variety. This is perhaps obvious: there is a great variety of ways of understanding and knowing the world that cannot be captured exclusively in terms of conceptual knowledge (knowing-how is one example). But I have a specific sort of understanding in mind. It is not an alternative to conceptual knowledge. It is rather a sort of understanding that must be added to it if we are to understand certain aspects of our world *fully*. The aspects I have in mind are of a broadly moral import. They are those which designate sorts of human practice and experience in which questions of value, of response, of feeling, come into play: joy, jealousy, suffering, love, as well as racism, exploitation, self-fulfilment, trust, and the like – many of the things we find given expression in literary works of art.

## V UNDERSTANDING AND MERELY KNOWING

To hurry my discussion along, I will offer a few examples, all rather far-fetched but I will bring them down to earth in a moment. Each of the examples concerns a certain failure of response. These failures in turn raise a question about the conditions under which we are willing to attribute genuine understanding to an agent.

Imagine that you are crossing a busy midday intersection when a large bus speeds past the red light and into the crowd of people directly in front of you. Bodies are thrown and lives are lost: quite a few people are clearly in a bad way. Next to you is a man who quickly produces a cell phone. He begins to dial. A sense of relief, if that is the right word, begins to wash over you: help will soon be on its way. But when the person the man has called answers, you hear the man say, 'Hey Pete, I just saw the damndest thing...' Now imagine the same scene, but after the accident the man turns to you and says, in absolute sincerity, 'someone *really* should call for help.' But he starts walking off, intently navigating his way round the wounded, his cell phone tucked securely in his pocket. Last, imagine not the accident but the moment before it. You and this odd man see the bus approaching. There is just enough time. You rush to push the people ahead of you out of harm's way. The man, however, pulls you back to safety and says, with a hint of tough knowingness, 'it ain't worth it.' You reply, 'Of course it is!' But it is too late. In all three cases, assume, the man does not strike you as fully aware of what is wrong with his responses. When he notices the look of disgust on your face, he appears not embarrassed (or defiant or amused) but genuinely nonplussed. His expression is one of, 'What?'

There are many things wrong with this man. Most are of the standard moral variety: he is likely in possession of a rather vicious character; he seems not to care much for what one should care for greatly; he turns a tragedy into an anecdote – and much else besides. But while these examples raise moral issues, my interest here is not quite in their moral dimension, narrowly conceived. Rather, I am especially interested in how the moral failure here suggests a certain *cognitive* failure. It is a failure of moral understanding, to be sure. But it is the issue of understanding itself that I wish to explore.

The first, perhaps obvious, point is that in each of these cases the failure we find in the man is not a failure of *knowledge*, at least in the minimal sense in which we ascribe knowledge to someone. He, like you, *knows* what has happened. If he did not know this, his responses would have been of an altogether different nature. He would have done nothing instead of an odd thing. He knows that there has been an accident, that there is a question as to whether one should risk one's safety to help others, that those suffering are not actors or automatons but people made of flesh and blood, and so on. If these are among the 'truths' of the matter, then the man is in possession of these truths. If you were to put them to him in the form of propositions, then he would assent to them. He knows, in this basic epistemic sense, what you know.

The question we naturally want to ask is: *given* that the man knows all this, *how* could he respond as he did? The strangeness of his response, of his particular way of acknowledging the knowledge he shares with you, gives us a reason to think that the difference between you and this man is not only moral but also intellectual: there is something he just does *not* get (or that the two of you get very differently). For if he understood the event as you did, he would have responded to your look of disapprobation not with confusion but a snarl, a mischievous grin – *something* that would have revealed that he is aware of how one should act in such a moment and that he just did not care to act thus. But this is precisely what you do *not* find in him. In a crucial respect he seems *oblivious*, over and above the respects in which he appears simply callous. His failure to lead his knowledge through the appropriate channels of response suggests that at some level there is a significant divergence in cognitive orientation toward the *same* event. He either does not understand something you do, or he understands it in a way that is fundamentally different than you do. Either way, there is something in your mind that cannot be found in his. What might it be, exactly?

There are many ways one could explain this, and I do not want to wander off into arcane corners of epistemology and cognitive philosophy in search of them. For the sake of simplicity, I shall distinguish two basic sorts of understanding this example suggests, with the hope that they will suffice in a general way to bring to view an interesting point about cognition. Each form of understanding concerns a grasp of what, one might say, ‘counts’ (in this and the following I draw from Mulhall 1994 and especially Cavell 1969).

In the first sense, call it the *critical*, to know is to know what counts as an *instance* of something: one thing a stone, another a table, that an expression of suffering, this of joy. Understanding in this sense is made evident by our success in extending our concepts out into the world and correctly placing particulars under their scope. This sort of understanding records a facility with dividing the world up accurately and correctly describing its particulars, a grasp of ‘what something is’ as a success of identifying this as that sort of thing. It is a matter, simply put, of the individuation and identity of the bits of the world before us. The man’s behavior meets this condition for ascribing understanding to him. He shows by his elementary success of identification – that what you and he witnessed is of the kind that it is, that the wounded are in the state that they are, etc. – that he is in possession of this sort of awareness.

But the example also gives us reason to think that without supplementation this form of understanding is decidedly incomplete. Indeed, there is something rather ‘mere’ about it. It is necessary, of course, for without the capacity to represent the world aright, we have no chance of responding to the world as we should. As a designation of a form of cognitive awareness, this critical understanding marks one of the most basic orientations we can have towards our world, that of simply being able to identify its furniture correctly. To meet this condition for counting as a knower, all one must do is reveal that he is in possession of the relevant concepts and that he can relate them to the world in a certain way. We expect much more from a knower than this. To count as genuinely understanding what one knows in this mere sense, one must grasp something else.

To borrow an ugly term from ethics, for a moment at least, we might call the second sense in which understanding is linked to a notion of what counts *axiological*. It is in this respect that the odd man does not quite understand what you do. Here 'counting' is, broadly put, a matter of value: of how something counts as an object of concern, as a site of significance, of how and why it *matters*. If the criterial sense emphasizes our ability to represent the world correctly, the axiological sense highlights the capacity to see the consequence of those aspects of the human world so represented. This sort of understanding designates an awareness of what is *at stake* when we represent the world in certain ways; it reveals a grasp of how an object or event should function to *engage* us with the world when we describe it as thus and such. To this extent, it is a distinctly cultural form of understanding, for it has as its target not merely objects and their identity conditions but the values, cares, and concerns that define the character of our particularly human practices and experiences.

Understanding is never value-neutral, is never merely conceptual, at least not when it concerns human reality. To count as possessing full understanding of something, we must reveal not only that we have the relevant concepts and representational capacities. We must also show that we are *alive* to those patterns of value, significance, and meaning that are woven into the aspects of the world we otherwise merely know. We do this not by revealing that we are in possession of the right propositions or descriptions, say by asserting, correctly, 'an ambulance is needed' or 'these people are in pain.' In fact, when we attempt to elaborate this sort of understanding, to bring into full view just what it is, we tend to do so by depicting not what one says but what one *does* when one knows something. We offer examples of how one *invests* himself in the particular scene he knows (or refuses to, say in a character such as Bartleby). That is, we describe a type of response, a kind of gesture, that embodies this understanding. We give an account of how one *acknowledges* what one knows, of how a piece of knowledge should function to configure the knower as certain sort of *agent*. And for this, a picture, a vision, of human activity is necessary, ~~not the elaboration of a concept or principle.~~

Note that a moral response, an act of acknowledgement, is a kind of dramatic gesture, and that the understanding it embodies ~~itself has a certain dramatic structure.~~ An act of acknowledgement is a way of giving life to what it is that we know, of bringing it into the public world, not unlike the way in which an actor gives life to a character, or an artist makes manifest an inner emotion through a perfectly rendered expression. Indeed, understanding, if fully possessed, establishes a type of dramatic relation between a knower and the world. It places us in the world as agents who are responsive to the range of values and experiences that are the mark of human reality. Recall that the term 'drama' itself comes to us from the Greek for 'action' or 'deed' (*drama*; adj. *dramatikos*), and that 'dramatic' has in its more contemporary usage the sense of doing something with an emotional investment or charge (see Shusterman 2001). These are, in effect, the signs of the form of understanding I have tried to outline here.

## VI LITERATURE AND THE EMBODIMENT OF UNDERSTANDING

So what does all of this allow us to say about the thesis of literary cognitivism? How might this offer a foundation for developing our intuition that literary works, while not in the business of stating truths about the world, still have much to show us about it?

I think that the first thing we should want to say is this. What literary representations are able to do especially well is take the concepts we bring to our reading of a work and present them back to us as concrete forms of human engagement. When we read *Notes from Underground* or *Bartleby the Scrivener*, we see suffering and alienation presented not as mere 'ideas' but as very precisely shaped human situations. And this contextualization of these concepts, this act of presenting them to us in concrete form, is literature's contribution to understanding, the particular light it has to shine on our world. Literary works do not embody conceptual knowledge, if by this we mean that they offer an elaboration of the nature of some aspect of our world, delivered, as it were, in a propositional package. Nor need they if they are to have a claim to cognitive value. If they embody a form of understanding, it will consist in a more literal act of embodiment, namely in the capacity of a literary narrative to give shape, form, and structure, to the range of values, concerns, and experiences that define human reality.

The vision of life we find in literary narratives shows us human practice and circumstance not from an abstracted, external perspective but from the 'inside' of life, in its full dramatic form. And if the argument I gave in the last section is convincing, we can now see how this dramatic presentation of life might be a very important cognitive achievement. This achievement does not consist in the stating of truths or the offering of knowledge of matters of fact. It is rather a matter of literature's ability to open up for us a world of value and significance and of all that this implies about our capacity to understand fully the import of various forms of human activity. Literary works' mode of engaging with the world is never narrowly or purely cognitive. Literature would not be *dramatic* if it were. But it is precisely this drama we need if we are to have a textual form that is capable of documenting our particular way in the world. And this is not a minor accomplishment from the cognitive point of view. It shows literature to be among the richest, most potent media we have for the articulation of cultural understanding.

When literary works are successful dramatic achievements, it is always in part because they fashion a sense of what is at stake in the specific regions of human circumstance they represent. In this respect there is an interesting parallel between literary narratives and moral responses. Just as a moral response does not so much convey knowledge of an event as it gives expression to an agent's awareness of its significance, literary works, rather than stating truths about our world, bring to light the consequence, the import, of those aspects of reality they bring before us. In this respect, literary works represent ways of acknowledging the world rather than knowing it. (See Gibson 2003, Gibson forthcoming, and Cavell 1969.) A literary narrative is in effect a sustained dramatic gesture, a way not only of presenting some content or material but of responding to it. What we see distilled into the narrative perspective is a vision of how and why this content *counts*, the precise respects in which it might matter.

These patterns of significance, value, and meaning we find in literary works are patterns to which we tend to have no cognitive access in our in less dramatic lives. This is one of literature's great compensations and it helps explain why we turn to it so often, with the expectation that we will leave our literary encounters edified and with a deeper grasp of the human world. We simply do not see what Eldridge felicitously calls the 'complex texture of our human lives' with such precision of detail and depth of vision in our everyday encounters with the world. For example, we very likely knew what racism is, or that a lynching is among its most brutal manifestations, before reading James Baldwin's short story 'Going to Meet the Man.' But unless we have engaged in the very practices Baldwin depicts in his story – and one would hope that few of us have – we haven't been granted an occasion to witness the form they may take as specific types of human activity. Baldwin's manner of representing the desires, repressions, pursuits, and relationships of the characters he imagines for us – indeed the precise manner in which he develops racism as a theme that structures the story itself – is itself a way of acknowledging what racism is. That is, it constitutes an attempt to render explicit its significance and import in the context of our cultural practices. And in following the story, we too are prompted to acknowledge something about the nature of racism, for instance that it can have its source in something other than just hatred and ignorance, contrary to a rather comfortable way of viewing it. It might reside in something much more primitive and pervasive, something that might reach all the way to the core of our social and sexual natures. Even if we know (in some sense) these things already, they are the sort of 'terrible truths' we tend to repress, to ignore; and by inviting us to follow it in its act of acknowledgement, Baldwin's story, and literature more generally, invites us to confront the human world rather than simply to 'know' it. But in confronting it, it also becomes clearer to us, since closer.

Literature does not treat the world as an object of knowledge but as a subject of human concern. And this itself is a cognitive accomplishment, a way of bearing witness to the world. Indeed, this gives us reason to speak of literature as engaged in a form of worldly investigation, just of a sort that is markedly different than we find in standard works of inquiry. It is a *dramatic* investigation. But human life itself is dramatic in nature, and thus literary works, in their characteristically literary form, are perfectly built for its exploration. Literary works needn't cast aside their literary pursuits and mimic works of philosophy if they are to engage in this form of investigation. They simply need to go about their usual business of weaving dramatic narratives. The category of the dramatic is, I take it, a proper *literary* category; the dramatic achievement of a literary work is intimately bound up with its aesthetic success and artistic accomplishment. In this respect, and contrary to a long-standing fear, to speak of the cognitive achievement of a literary work is not to speak of something altogether other than its properly aesthetic and literary features.

If this is so, then we can respect the textual constraint when defending literary cognitivism. For the form of insight literature trades in is bound up with the internal structure of a literary work. In fact, it is inseparable from it. The insight into life we find in a great novel is the novel itself, as the New Critics liked to remind us. It is woven into the fabric of the story and the specific ways in which it configures and gives dramatic expression to its subject matter. Thus we should not ask



whether literary works might be able to do what standard works of inquiry do if we wish to defend literary cognitivism. They do not, nor should we wish them to. We can leave them be as they are, without worrying that we will thereby make them cognitively trivial on account of it.

Instead of asking whether literary works might be able to offer us what other works of inquiry do, a more interesting way of putting the matter is to ask what aspects of our world would be left undocumented, unaccounted for, if we had no literary works. If we think of texts as archives in which we store the various accounts we have to offer of the nature of our world, what would be missing if there were no literary texts? The question itself is likely imponderable, for if literary works play an important role in the articulation of cultural understanding, then our sense of our world is itself at least partly literary in origin. At any rate, what we would lack without literary works (and artworks more generally), what would be missing from our archive, is not a body of knowledge – this doesn't sound quite right – but a certain perspective. It would be, of course, the human perspective, that purchase on the world that reveals not what we know about it but how we go about living in it. Without this, we really wouldn't have much to show for ourselves.

*for the*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carroll, N. (1998). Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding. In J. Levinson (Ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cavell, S. (1969). Knowing and Acknowledging. In *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Cohen, T. (2004). Metaphor, Feeling, and Narrative. In E. John & D. Lopes (Eds.), *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beardsley, M. (1981). Fiction as Representation. *Synthese*, 46, 291-313.
- Davies, D. (2000). Fiction. In B. Gaut & D. Lopes (Eds.), *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. London: Routledge.
- Davis, T. (1996). *Humanism*. London: Routledge.
- Doležal, L. (1998). *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eldridge, R. (1997). *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Eldridge, R. (2005). *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fish, S. (1980). *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frege, G. (1970). *On Sense and Reference*. In P. Geach & M. Black (Eds. & Trans.), *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1970)
- Gaut, B. (2006). Art and Cognition. In M. Kieran (Ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibson, J. (2003). Between Truth and Triviality. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 224-237.
- Gibson, J. (2004). Reading for Life. In J. Gibson & W. Huemer (Eds.), *The Literary Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge.
- Gibson, J. (in press). *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Unpublished manuscript, Oxford University Press.
- Graham, G. (1995). Learning from Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35, 26-37.
- Harold, J. (2003). Flexing the Imagination. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61, 247-258.
- Harrison, B. (1991). *Inconvenient Fictions: Fiction and the Limits of Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- John, E. (2003). Literary Fiction and the Philosophical Value of Detail. In M. Kieran & D.M. Lopes (Eds.), *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*. London: Routledge.
- Kivy, P. (1997). *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamarque, P. (1996). *Fictional Points of View*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lamarque, P. (2006.) Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries. In M. Kieran (Ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lamarque, P. & Olsen, S.H. (1994). *Truth, Fiction and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Mulhall, S. (1994). *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- New, C. (1999). *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Russell, B. (1962). *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. London: Routledge.

Searle, J. (1974-5). The Logical Status of Fictional discourse. *New Literary History*, 6, 319-332.

Shusterman, R. (2001). Art as Dramatization. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59, 363-372.

Stolnitz, J. (1992). On the Cognitive Triviality of Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, 191-200.

Walton, K. (1990). *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walton, K. (1997). Spelunking, Simulation, and slime: On Being Moved by Fiction. In M. Hjort & S. Laver (Eds.), *Emotion and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weston, M. (2001). *Literature, Philosophy and the Human Good*. London: Routledge.

White, H. (1978). *Tropics of Discourse*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.