"The Knowledge of Literature": or The Special Effects of Literary Discourse

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"The knowledge of literature" is the central topic dealt with in the eponymous Conference Series held at the University of Bergamo from 2001-2011.[1] My primary concern in the ensuing volumes was to investigate the question of what sort of knowledge, if any, literature provides, both *qua* literature, but also in relation to other forms of knowledge (such as philosophy, the hard sciences, the social sciences, psychoanalysis, medicine, religion, history, the visual arts, etc.). Volumes VI and VII in the series specifically deal with literature and science, Vol. VIII with literature, myth and religion; Volume IX with literature and history; and volume X with the cognitive import of the visual and the verbal. As I developed my investigation into these matters, it became apparent that literature was able to produce special, and even unique, cognitive and aesthetic effects among various disciplines providing knowledge.

Life and Literature

We often hear, in everyday conversation, in publishers and booksellers' advertisements, and also among the reasons for literary awards, that novels, poetry, and plays tell us something important about "life". What is usually meant by this philosophically loaded term is: "identity", "desires", "emotions", "conflicts", and a variety of "social contexts", in short – "human experience".

But we also often hear, and this attitude is becoming more rampant in the age of TV talk shows and videogames, in the age that too often equates "culture" exclusively with "market", that literature is just a pastime, a means of evasion, less exciting perhaps than the latest gadget, but still enjoyable on certain occasions, like a plane or train ride. Most readers will probably simultaneously hold both of these views, and arguably so in relation to the kind of "literature" they read. Readers of "Anna Karenina" will go, first and foremost, for "human experience", readers of "Harry Potter" for entertainment and evasion. The most common of "common readers" would thus already have identified two important, perhaps the major, "special effects" of literature: i.e. knowledge and enjoyment, and, of course, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But what kind of pleasure and what kind of knowledge are we talking about? How is that pleasure and that knowledge "of life" provided?

A good start to answer this question is to show that literature's knowledge is close to the living phenomena, as opposed to the aridity of an always-already dead abstraction. Many eminent critics in the past, from Sir Philip Sidney to Lukács, and many theorists today, from Martha Nussbaum to Jean-Jacques Lecercle, have held and still hold this opinion. I am in complete agreement with them and wish to highlight the fact that literature provides a knowledge of the subject both in the act of knowing and of the subject as it is known.

Ronald Shusterman explains the ways in which literature is related to "life" in his contribution to Vol. IV of the "The Knowledge of Literature" (Shusterman 2004:39-60). He deals with the phenomenology of (re)cognition and its relevance in general aesthetics, and he proposes a list of: "different types of links between the work of art and the real". His list includes five forms of relation:

1. *Correspondence* to reality
2. *Connection* to reality
3. *Connection* to life
4. *Relatedness* to context
5. *Aboutness* with respect to context.

In the case of *correspondence to reality*, the work of art expresses verifiable truth in some direct and explicit way. We come to *connection to reality* when the work doesn't actually correspond to a fact, but is in some way linked to the external world. Factually speaking, there is no such city as Christminster, but this fictional city is realistic and in many ways connected to the actual city of Oxford. In the third type, *connection to life*, the term *reality* has been replaced by a term more suited for dealing with the psychological, ethical, and political elements that one usually has in mind when claiming that a certain work of art is true to life. The fourth type of connection – *relatedness* – is simply the claim that the work is related in any number of ways to the socio-historical context in which it has been produced. Shusterman concludes that: "a work that is not only a trace of human situations, be they social or political or whatever, but which is also, in some sense, a *treatment* of these contexts would illustrate the concept of *aboutness* that I have put at the end of my list. These different types of relation may be combined in certain works; any work will require its own mixture of acts of recognition".

The third type of relationship, i.e. literature's "connection to life" seems to me the most intriguing, and perhaps the one that most eloquently defines the range of literature's powers and specificity, its diversity from the truths of scientific discourse. In fact, this is the realm of literature's attention to the subject and to the other. In order to elaborate on this observation I need to recall Martha Nussbaum's suggestion (Nussbaum 1995:16) that literature has a social usefulness because it can move us beyond the abstractions of ethics and social sciences, by making us "capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others". The empathetic imagining provided by literature is a road (not the only one, of course) towards an ethics of "impartial respect for human dignity".

If Nussbaum's position seems too optimistic in a literate world which is still plagued by violence and discrimination, I would nonetheless suggest that literature is particularly valuable in corroborating an attitude of impartial respect for the other because it adopts a subjective but simultaneously also a shared point of view, and a plurality of points of view at the same time. I wish to underline that this is the case with literature from its earliest beginning, because drama and dialogue take their origin, at least in the Greco-Roman cultural tradition, in the rhetorical exercise of arguing *in utramque partes*, as opposed to the monolithic, and putatively objective point of view of the hard and human sciences.

In volume I of "La conoscenza della letteratura", I have argued that the imaginative, emotional and empathetic dimensions of literature make it socially valuable and cognitively unique, and that the criticality of literature has both an ethical and an epistemological value (Locatelli 2001:7-12; 181-190).

The intellectual apprehension of complex situations is the *vis vitalis* of literature (Locatelli 2004:173-188). A few salient points may illustrate the "special effects" of literature: it possesses a dynamic symbolic strength, which is both centripetal and centrifugal, i.e. literature moves towards itself (as meta-language, and as the site of intertextuality), and moves towards the representation and the construction of the external world.

Insofar as literature partakes of both mimesis and imagination, it is a royal road to knowledge because it "holds the mirror up to nature", but it is also a site of what Nelson Goodman calls "worldmaking" (Goodman 1992). In fact, I see fiction as a sort of thought experiment, the site of construction of alternative worlds, where the rules of everyday referentiality do not apply.

A work of art, according to Derrida (1992:33-75) has: "in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution".

Literature's cognitive function is therefore also manifest in its critical function, particularly when it works as a critique of the ideologies it represents, and may implicitly or explicitly challenge. After Foucault and Derrida, I would say that by suspending reference, literature suspends (or even abrogates) the law.

Literature enables readers to achieve a specific awareness of the world that the social sciences do not provide, but one of its "special affects" is that it can create a synergy of knowledge with them. There are numerous occasions for these synergies, for example when:

1) **Literature sheds light on variously important social mechanisms**

Let me briefly recall:

- the rites of passage that are illustrated (and often questioned) in the *bildungsroman*;
- the containment strategy of comic misrule, which subverts established hierarchies (see Barber (1963) on Shakespearean Comedy and Bakhtin (1968) on the Carnival). I have called these strategies "litotic" because they (temporarily) deny established social values in order to (re)affirm them fully.
- the illustrations of mimetic desire and victimization strategies (René Girard (1986, 1991, 1997) on scapegoating, and on Shakespeare and Dostoevsky).

2) **Literature illustrates different psychic and cognitive states**

Literature is the locus where disparate cognitive states are displayed "from the inside", not in the abstract and generalising mode of clinical diagnosis. Dreams, visions, and even the unconscious, which Freud himself admitted to have found in Sophocles, find in literature a non-reductional expression.

I agree that videogames may stimulate cognitive faculties, and that cybertexts do so through the dynamic strategy of interactive simulation, but they seem to address a nar-

row sector of human intelligence and a limited cognitive potential, if compared to literature's wider appeal (Schlaeger and Stedman 2008).

3) **Literature represents the various silences of the repressed, the unsaid, the socially forbidden**

Freud has magisterially taught us that the *witz* bypasses censorship (Freud 1960).

Literature also indicates the silence of the ineffable (the Romantic symbol being, of course, its highest expression).

4) **Literature promotes the recognition of different identities (including one's own)**

Literature gives us access to alterity by representing the voice of the other in a number of different ways. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2003:18-19) reminds us: "I do not read a literary text to find my own image, but to have access to the image of other(s)". Lecercle further explains : "Literature it is that allows me to break away from myself and offers me the luxury of access to another consciousness, to the consciousness of the other. 'Confessions', as we all know, is an important subgenre of literature, and through the techniques of point of view or stream of consciousness typical of the modernist novel, literature makes the reader a happy peeping Tom. […] this is made possible because of the collective medium of language, because intersubjectivity is always-also interlocution".

I will add that if we emphasize the representative quality of texts – we can often see the literary text as the expression of a group identity (usually a social, ethnic, religious, sexual minority). This aspect includes the problem of both the construction of such an identity, and of its recognition and acceptance by others.

Literature aptly responds to these challenges because it can stage the individuality of a voice or voices in the text, and the collectivity which implies (and highlights) the representative nature of the text. We should always be aware of the fact that literary texts are both representative and unique. They participate in both a subjective knowledge and a shared knowledge. I believe that literature is an encounter with alterity, with distant others, but also that it is an encounter with one's own consciousness and social identity. In this sense, I agree with Derek Attridge (2004:86) when he writes that: "I can be surprised by the closeness of a work to me, the way it seems to echo what I had assumed to be my private thought.[…] We may feel that a work we are reading speaks directly to our deepest selves, yet when we look back we have to acknowledge that we had no awareness of those aspects of our subjectivity before the reading that offered itself as an affirmation of them."

The Cognitive Complexity of Literary Form

The specific knowledge and pleasure of literature depend on form. They are fully displayed in "poetic thought", a kind of conceptual activity which cannot simply be reduced to or "translated into" linear, plain, univocal statements. Poetic thought, as I see it, is a way of thinking that implies a "unified sensibility", and the layered complexity of logical, emotional and even sensuous apprehensions.

I am convinced that the figurality of literature sustains a conceptual complexity that neither the plain statement nor any videogame can convey. Metaphor, metalepsis, litotes, amphibology, paradox, and what the Russian Formalists have called "device", allow literary discourse to say more than one thing at once, and even to say contradictory things at once. This is where literature is farthest removed from the univocal dimension of scientific discourse or the predetermined options of videogames software. Let me paraphrase two sentences from Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" and "Orlando" and suggest that in literature (and in poetry *par excellence*) "nothing is simply one thing" and "everything, in fact, is something else" (Locatelli 2004:141-152). This is a feature that only literature displays among the human sciences (with the exception of contemporary philosophy, which has, of course, largely moved in this direction in the 20th century.

Literature directs us to an image of "truth" which cannot be attained through purely logical, causal, probabilistic, or pragmatic criteria. I therefore see literature as a process of simultaneous veiling and unveiling (the Italian term *s/velare*, meaning a "revelation" through unveiling, is indeed adequate to indicate what literature "does"), and I see theory as the gesture that captures such process, essentially through questioning and criticality (Locatelli 2005:1-12). The literary has a different import and purpose from scientific discourse, which aims at universal and univocal meaning, and also aims at information and usefulness. Literature is "useless" in a Kantian sense, and certainly "of little use" in a pragmatic sense: teaching how to sail a boat is not the major aim of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", nor is Mrs. Dalloway's walk in the streets of London a comparable substitute for a Tourist Guide to the city.

When they interrogate their own epistemic status, the human sciences are increasingly recognizing that literature is a source of knowledge. The ever deepening interest in narrativity, strategies of emplotment, metaphorical thinking on the part of social psychologists (Bruner 2001:25-37), cognitive scientists (Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Toolan & Weber 2005), neuroscientists (Gomez Mont and Vega Osorno 2011:49-64), etc., is there to prove it.

The very acquisition of cultural systems through which we make sense of the world is promoted by storytelling and poetry, and by a "narrative understanding" even before logical reasoning. It follows that literature and theory certainly have the expertise in, and the understanding of "narrative and fictional mechanisms" which seem now required in areas as distant as medicine (Engelhardt 2004:153-172), psychotherapy (Barbetta 2002: 159-180), photography (Agazzi 2004:51-73), advertising, religion, and law.

It follows that both literature and literary theory can offer their critical competence in our experiences of acquiring, deciphering, and interpreting cultures, texts, ideologies, i.e. in interpreting what we call "life". I do not need to remind you that epistemology indicates that interpretation and knowledge are intrinsically related.

Most importantly, I hope to have shown that literature offers a form of knowledge which is highly specific. It does not claim and does not aim at exactitude, precision, impartiality, objectivity, and pragmatic verification. These are, however, the criteria of scientific "truth" that are most prized in our culture today. Incidentally, let me say that it clearly was not so in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, when religious metaphysics

was deemed both the criterion and domain of absolute truth. Which shows that knowledge is time and culture specific.

After Nietzsche, Freud, and Bakhtin literature seems to me to put us in a relationship with "truth", provided this happens figuratively, obliquely, paradoxically, and also through the insuppressible polyphony of voices that characterizes its discourse. I would not hesitate, of course, call these the "special effects" of "literary style". They depend on Literature's unique relationship to language. I reject the idea of "style" as mere ornament, but see it as an inescapable and specific epistemic category, not only for literature, but for any discipline, field, or theory. In this sense knowledge is style-specific. Style is not embellishment but it is a "cognitive position", and this is clearly visible in each discipline's defense of its own protocols. This takes me to my next and final section.

Literature's Special Relationship to Language

Literature's special relationship to language makes it a unique form of knowledge. We can certainly find social, historical, moral "truths" and "facts" in literature, but this is true also for the disciplines of history, sociology, psychology, anthropology and ethics. We can find in these disciplines emancipative and reparative cultural strategies that are morally valuable. However, as Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Jacques Lecercle have shown, only literature provides knowledge of "life" through knowledge of language.

I will add that Literature puts back into the culture a memory of the language, a trace of its historical stratifications, cultural modifications, and that literature registers and transmits not just events or memories, but the "flavour" (what I call "expressiveness") of the language in which the (recorded) events were lived. Only literature among the human sciences gives us a kind of language that is communicative, expressive, and inventive, at the same time. These three features of its language are crucial in the knowledge that literature provides.

Any global language necessarily tends to be effective, i.e. merely communicative, but this happens at the expense of expressiveness and inventiveness. Internet or ESP English are certainly not the English of poets and novelists, but an impoverished, albeit functional version of it. Any professional language amounts to a curtailing of the full potential of language, which, on the contrary literature can preserve, keep in view, and circulate in the culture. Literature takes language to its limit, and the philosophy of Deleuze (1986, 1998, 2008) has indeed called attention to this aspect, particularly in his concept of "minority literature"(elaborated with Felix Guattari), in his works on Spinoza, as well as in his unique "readings" of literary texts, from Proust to Melville, from Kafka to Beckett.

The anthropological consequences of the political and practical choices a culture makes regarding language are indeed extremely relevant, and so are its choices regarding literature. The jargon ridden vocabulary we increasingly use in everyday language, i.e. the jargon of the professions, with its soaring number of neologisms and formulaic turns of phrase, is fostering nothing less than unprecedented subjectivities, it is changing who we are. Pier Paolo Pasolini prophetically perceived and forcefully deplored this state of affairs in the Italian culture of the Sixties and Seventies; his remarks have become more poignant with the explosion of capitalist communication industry, and the advent

of formulaic reports, memos and demos in the workplace and beyond, in cell phone texting, cybertexts, hypertext, and internet menus, all of which disregard the infinite variety of expression afforded by natural language and literary language. A great writer, on the contrary, absorbs, passes on and contributes to the language s/he finds. But I wish to emphasise that "linguistic innovation" is at the same time "philosophical innovation" because, as Antonio Gramsci (1971) who is better known as a Marxist, but was also a trained linguist, reminds us, any language is always "a conception of the world".

I have proposed that literature's linguistic inventiveness depends on the use of the full potential of language, let me add that its inventiveness lies not just in creating new plots (Shakespeare borrowed nearly all of them). The complex language of literature is what provides as many different conceptions of the world as there are writers and even literary works. We can certainly see literature as a rich jewel box of plots and characters that can be transferred to film, or artistic performances, but we cannot reduce literature to a storehouse of plots: we would miss the specificity of its special effects *qua* literature. Let me remind you that even the apparently merely communicative language of Hemingway is precisely his unmistakable style, and even such seemingly "plain style" widely differs from the inexpressive and homogeneous language of professional jargons. However, even these jargons would become expressive in literary discourse (instrumental as they are in connoting a character's social status and historical contingency). E-novels can provide knowledge, they "hold the mirror up to nature", being written in the language in which we live the postmodern condition. When they are written by someone sensitive to language use, they become literature in the full sense of the term (and not merely in the sense in which the instructions of my photo-camera is 'literature').

To conclude, let me say that literature's fictional status and its focus on the particular have long been despised, or at best, misrecognized as irrelevant, but I believe that literature has a significant cognitive value and a social role to play also in our postmodern age because its "special effects" cannot be replaced by the extant hypertexts or even cybertexts. Moreover, in epistemic terms, literature's claims seem indeed too modest, *vis à vis* the immodest claims of positivistic science or analytic and systematic philosophy, because literature does not display its complex cognitive wonders at first sight. The way to literary Wonderland is a slow movement, the patient acquisition of a specific expertise, leading to the wonders of endless (re)cognitions. Like slow food, as opposed to fast food, literature is delightful and healthy.

Note:

1. See: Locatelli, Angela (Ed.), 2001-201... I wish to warmly thank Professor Seda Gasparyan from Yerevan State University for her valuable contribution to this series. See: Gasparyan, Seda *On Objectivity in Understanding Verbal Art* (2006) in Angela Locatelli (Ed.), *La Conoscenza della letteratura/The Knowledge of Literature*, Vol.V, Bergamo, Sestante Edizioni, Bergamo University Press (pp.67-72).

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Գրականության իմացականությունը կամ գրական դիսկուրսի հատուկ ազդեցությունը

Գրականությունն ունի իմացական մեծ արժեք և սոցիալական նշանակություն, որոնք այնուամենայնիվ, մինչև այժմ հիմնականում չեն կարևորվել: Այսպիսի անտեսման պատճառն այն է, որ գրականությունը հեշտությամբ ու միանգամից ի ցույց չի դնում իր բարդ իմացական հրաշալիքները, դրանք հնարավոր է ընկալել միայն իմաստավորման և վերաիմաստավորման երկար և անվերջ թվացող ճանապարհն անցնելուց հետո: Գրականությունը ոչ միայն երևակայական գեղագիտական պատկերներ է ներկայացնում, այլև գիտակցականության և սոցիալական ինքնության բազմաթիվ ու բազմազան դրսևորումներ: