

Against the Cognitive Triviality of Art

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I try to defend art from those who claim that it is cognitively trivial. I claim that the notion of cognitive value should be expanded so as to include notions that epistemologists and aestheticians alike recognize as cognitively valuable, like understanding and awareness. Next, I claim that art generally, but literature in particular is in its main aspects similar to testimony, which is nowadays recognized as indispensable source of knowledge. Showing in what way literature can be seen as testimony, I claim that the cognitive value of art translates to the cognitive value of testimony.

I. Preliminaries

In this paper I want to show that John Gibson (2003) was right when he claimed that “there is a form of cognitive awareness left unmentioned in the traditional vocabulary of knowledge acquisition, a form of awareness literature is particularly capable of offering”¹. In doing that, I will join the long debated issue of whether or not art has cognitive value² and the best place to start is with the opinion of Jarome Stolnitz (1992), who put forward some serious objections to the claim that art is cognitively valuable in his article ‘On the cognitive triviality of art’³. Stolnitz tried to show that art, apart from having no reference to anything beyond itself, is cognitively trivial because its truths are radically different from some other practices

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¹Gibson, 2003, p. 225.

² Unlike some others, like B. Gaut, (see Gaut 2007) I do not want to claim that the cognitive value of art makes it aesthetically (more) valuable. My main concern is to show that art generally, and literature in particular, is cognitively valuable. I do not want to discuss whether cognitive value makes is more or less aesthetically valuable.

³ Stolnitz, 1992, reprinted in John E. and McIver Lopes, D., eds. 2004. Page numbers refer to (2004) article.

whose truths are, as he says, 'beyond dispute'. Of course, the first candidate to fit this category is science⁴. As Stolnitz sees it, science has several aspects which make it fit to discover the truth. To begin with, "We have a relatively clear and firm conception of how science arrives at its truths" (p. 317) and by this he has in mind a scientific method. Although he is well aware that there are some disputes over the nature and reliability of this method, Stolnitz claims that it is still more appropriate to speak of scientific truths than to speak of artistic truths. As he claims, "... method of artistic truth is not matter for debate and hardly makes sense" (p. 317). So this is the first problem for art: it has no method that yields truths. Next, "scientific truths, once arrived at, are truths about the great world" (p.317), whereas in the case of art, it is not really clear what those truths could be. Also, in the case of scientific truths, we have a large body of evidence that confirms them and what is even more, "truths, notably, in the cumulative advances of science, support and build on each other. Out of them and epistemic auxiliaries, theories are constructed" (p. 321). None of these is found in art, no evidence and no confirmation. And finally, scientific truths are confined to a "certain sector or stratum of reality (...). These studies are carried out by specialists, who are knowledgeable and possess unusual abilities of thought and research" (p. 321). On the other hand, as Stolnitz sees it, in art there is no evidence, and truths derived from one artwork never confirms the other. There are no specialists in art, and no truth is peculiar to art, since they all refer to some extra-artistic sphere. Finally, truth is always connected to knowledge. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of scientific knowledge, but it is unheard of artistic knowledge. In the end, Stolnitz concludes,

⁴ Apart from science, Stolnitz also compares artistic truths to theological truths and to what he calls garden variety truths. By comparing art with these other 'practices', he tries to show that art lacks those fundamental cognitive elements that are found in science, history, theology and everyday experience, such as evidence, methodology, confirmation, experts etc. I will mostly focus on the part of his argument dealing with science. I will leave out religion, although I think his argument here is terribly wrong. Religion is founded upon faith and church authority and the whole theist vs. atheist debate is partially triggered by the fact that we cannot prove religious truths and we cannot come to believe in God or heaven by any rational argument. So it is surprising to me that someone would choose to put religious truths as paradigm of truth.

In either case, there is no method of arriving at truth in art and no confirmation or possibility of confirmation in art. Artistic truths, like the works of art that give rise to them, are discretely unrelated and therefore form no corpus either of belief or of knowledge. Hence formal contradictions are tolerated effortlessly, if they are ever remarked. Only rarely does an artistic truth point to a genuine advance in knowledge. Artistic truths are, preponderantly, distinctly banal. Compared to science, above all, but also to history, religion, and garden variety knowing, artistic truth is a sport, stunted, hardly to be compared. These are the slight, dull, obvious realities which have been obscured by the grandiose pieties of cognitivism [...].⁵

I would like to challenge this view and it seems to me there are two ways to do it. The first one is to claim that there are in fact at least some similarities between science and art⁶. The other one is to show that there is a sense, epistemologically supported, in which art can be seen as cognitively valuable: this is the path I want to take in this article. My main concern will be literature, including fiction, but I believe it is possible to stretch my arguments so as to include some other forms of art that were traditionally considered to be cognitively valuable, such as visual art. My argument in this part consists of two steps. First, I will try to challenge the notion of cognitive value as Stolnitz sees it, claiming that it is too narrow. Then I will show that among the epistemologically recognized sources of knowledge there is one which is, in all of its relevant aspects, similar to literature and that by its very nature accommodates this broadly taken cognitive value.

⁵ Stolnitz, 2004, p. 322.

⁶ I will not take this path here, but just to give you an idea of what I have in mind, think of all the hypothesizing, thought-experimenting, imagining what is like, or what would be like, model constructing, or just 'supposing that' that are parts of scientific methods. Scientific discovery of truth is full of making assumptions, finding the hypothesis that only seems to be the best solution or explanation of the given data. These inherent features of scientific method do not pass Stolnitz's criteria and the fact that there are so many disagreements between the scientists (just think of the swine flue vaccination) proves that.

II. Expanding the Notion of Cognitive Value

As Stolnitz sees it, cognitive value is intimately connected with truth and knowledge. In fact, it is this assumption that gives power to his conclusion, since in his view something is cognitively valuable only in so far as it amounts to the two. Therefore, science is cognitively valuable — its methods are designed so as to discover truths, these truths have evidential back up and they support each other, which turn them into a coherent body of knowledge — and art on the other hand, is not cognitively valuable because it doesn't discover truth and therefore doesn't convey knowledge. This view corresponds to the co-called monistic picture of epistemic value(s); traditionally, knowledge has been the principal epistemological concern. In that sense, science was seen as the best possible tool available for reaching it. However, things have changed. Epistemologists, lead by D. Pritchard (2009) and J. Kvanving (2005), today do not just praise knowledge, there are other epistemologically valuable goals on the horizon, such as understanding, awareness or appreciation. In order to understand something, or become aware of it, it is not enough just to be told that; one must 'see it' so to say, for himself. In other words, one must utilize his cognitive abilities, exercise his rational agency. It seems to me therefore that we should accept a broader notion of cognitive value, one which takes understanding, awareness and similar notions along. That doesn't mean that knowledge is no longer important, it only means that it is not the sole valuable thing that we search for. Understanding something, becoming aware of something, being able to see something or to realize it better are also valuable cognitive achievements which enrich us cognitively. And all the 'incentives' (for the lack of a better expression) are therefore at least instrumentally valuable.

III. Art from Another Perspective

Where art went wrong in Stolnitz's story was the fact that it had no method, no evidence and no confirmation, and therefore it made no sense to talk about artistic truth and artistic knowledge. Stolnitz then concluded that art is cognitively trivial since it amounts to no knowledge, least not to some that *cannot be learnt by some other means*. However, I would now

like to present a different view of art and its role. It remains unclear why art should have *its* method of discovering *its* truths about the great world. Traditionally, art was given different roles and expected to do different things (educate, trigger emotions, represent the world as it is, make the world better than it is), but very rarely, if ever, was it supposed to discover *how* the world is. This was always the unique task of the science and part of its glory *derives from* its ability to do so. But that doesn't mean that art cannot be cognitively valuable: rather than thinking of it in terms of what it can discover, we should think of it in terms of how it can enrich us cognitively. I have already shown that cognitive value does not exhaust itself in discovering truth; being a vehicle of transmitting it, or a mechanism of generating true beliefs, or just an incentive to take a different perspective on the given issue, can also be cognitively valuable. And this is what art does well, as I will show.

But, how should we view art in order to attribute it cognitive value, understood in the broader notion I have been advocating? First of all, it is important to notice that there are different, epistemologically identified mechanisms of generating knowledge and transmitting true beliefs. Perception is the first, because without it, we wouldn't be able to experience things and explore our surroundings at all. Reason helps us deduce things from what we know and to expand our knowledge in that way. Memory helps us to stick to what we know and to what we have experienced. Introspection tells us about ourselves, our mental states, our feelings. But all of that would be highly insufficient were it not for the testimony. Epistemologists today recognize testimony as the prime source of knowledge about the world, other people, distant times and places, interactions and affairs of people etc. Without testimony, we would be left with our poor, insufficient experience and would not be able to function. I think that art can be seen as a form of testimony. Not all art, obviously, but literature, including fiction definitely can. So, my suggestion is that literature can be seen as a kind of a testimony, told by the author. I will refer to it, for terminological reasons, as fictional testimony.

Epistemologists today constantly emphasize the importance of testimony in the transmission of knowledge⁷. Without the testimony of other people, it would be impossible for us to know anything beyond our immediate experience. But even more than that, notice that the knowledge we gain from other people is not always propositional knowledge, but it includes what D. Walsh named ‘knowing what’ is like to experience something⁸. It seems to me there is a very firm analogy between the sorts of knowledge we gain from testimony and the forms of knowledge literature can provide⁹.

Before going on to elaborate this, notice that this already eliminates one of the strongest Stolnitz’s ground stone for triviality, his claim that everything that can be learnt from art can be learnt by some other means. Consider this testimonial exchange: if you tell me there is a glass on the table, your statement is not trivial just because I could have (or have) seen it myself, with my eyes, or because I remember putting it there or seeing someone else putting it there. Different sources of knowledge do not annihilate (or make trivial) one another if they reveal the same thing.

Let us turn to testimony more closely now¹⁰. What is involved in testimony is a chain of communication between at least two parties¹¹. On the

⁷ There is an extensively great amount of literature on testimony, but for the most recent account see Lackey 2008.

⁸ Cited in Wilson (2004), p. 325, and Lamarque and Olsen, (1994) p. 342.

⁹ One can find different labels for this idea, it is claimed that literature can provide us with cognitive strengthening (Lamarque), enrichment of human understanding (Graham), clarificationism (Carroll) or eye-opening effect (Lamarque). However, one thing all of these have in common is the explicit statement that we can learn things from art. For more elaborated accounts, see, Graham 1997, Lamarque and Olsen 1994, Lamarque 2009, Gaut 2007.

¹⁰For the purposes of this paper I couldn’t go into details regarding the definition and nature of testimony, because that itself is a book long topic. Therefore, I have accepted one view of testimony (the so called broad view), and I will not give arguments in support of it or show that some other accounts of testimony are not acceptable. However, I think that the nature of testimony is very important in this regard and that my thesis would be modified or maybe even rejected completely if one accepted some other account of testimony. I rely mostly on Lackey’s idea that what is involved in testimony are statements: we learn from what other people tell us. However, given that Lackey dismisses the broad view I am advocating here, I think she wouldn’t agree with some of my conclusions.

¹¹ By communication I have in mind oral and written.

one side of the chain is the testifier who is, on the most general account, telling things to those on the other side of the chain, namely his audience. Understood like this, it makes sense to claim that fictional testimony is just one special kind of testimony, since it includes one side, namely the author, (let's say Jane Austin) telling things (about Mr. Darcy for example) to the other side, namely her audience. So, at this most general level, fictional testimony fits just well into the (most general) definition of testimony, advocated for by E. Fricker, who claims that in testimony, "there is no restriction on the subject matter" and E. Sosa, who claims that testimony is "directed to the world generally and to no one in particular"¹². So, from now on, when I speak about testimony, I have in mind telling things generally, things whose domain is broad enough to include informative and objective reporting, and telling things which are more subjective and which provide information not about reality but about personal opinions, experiences, and attitudes. My view of testimony therefore allows for all three kinds of knowledge (knowing that, knowing how, and knowing what) to be transmitted from one person to the other. This is important because I believe that these different kinds of information can serve different cognitive roles, all of which have some kind of cognitive value.

So, up till now, I have claimed that we should expand the notion of cognitive value beyond that which ties it to knowledge. Following epistemologists like Duncan Pritchard (2009) and aestheticians like John Gibson (2003, 2006) and Gordon Graham (1997), I claim that *understanding, awareness, knowing what is like, realizing*, are all cognitively valuable achievements, often brought to the agent through testimony. My next step is to show that if we regard a literary work as a testimony of the author, rather than as a practice that is to discover truth, we have at our disposal a way to save cognitive value of art.

IV. Saving the Cognitive Value of Art.

Why do I claim that the work of fiction can be seen as a testimony? Basically, because it seems to me that there are enough similarities between

¹² See Lackey 2008, ch. 1.

everyday, non fictional testimony and what I call fictional testimony; they both include some kind of communication and exchange of information. Fictional and non fictional sayings alike are usually well structured, information conducive type of communication that one part, namely the speaker/author is reporting, via some kind of communicable content, to the other side, the hearer/audience, that for the most part is not familiar with these sayings, but can use them to learn something new or to expand the knowledge he already has. Both of them can be true or false, both of them can deceive us, give us false ideas, generate untrue beliefs and be the product of a deceptive mind. That's the negative scenario. But in the positive scenario, both of these kinds of testimonies can tell us something about the world, help us reach a broader understanding of it, make us more aware of things, show us 'what is like' to experience something that we ourselves haven't yet (or perhaps never will) experienced. So obviously, the cognitive value of literature comes very close to the cognitive value of testimony, which is, as I have already said, epistemologically indispensable source of knowledge. And that is very similar to Gibson's claim from the beginning.

Probably the biggest problem for my claim is the fact that literature and fiction are invented by the creative, imaginative author and therefore cannot be true, even if there is one- to- one correspondence between events described in the fiction and the real world. I will call this the problem of imagination. Another problem, probably the most pressing objection to treating fictional testimony as cognitively valuable is the fact that it is hard to show in what sense it conveys truth, since it originates in the imagination and in most cases doesn't aim at truth. There are several reasons why this question is so big and hard. The first one is the fact, already established, that a lot of things in fiction are invented, made up, false, non-referential, nonexistent, contrary to natural laws, utterly impossible in the real world and so on, which is of course the main reason why we cannot speak of truth in fiction, and why we cannot claim that the work of fiction is a source of knowledge. However, this is overly too simplified picture which neglects the fact that there are a lot of things which are

true in fiction and which can be related to the real world¹³. To mention just few examples, think of *Moby Dick*, a book which includes extremely long and complicated, essay-like parts about whales which in some places assume encyclopedic features. Or think about all the historical, geographical, psychological, philosophical, biological ‘truths’ that are revealed in the fiction and can be learned just from reading books like *The Elementary Particles*. Finally, it is plausible to claim that sometimes it is hard to distinguish where real life ends and fiction begins, just think about fictional conversation which takes place between a girl and a boy in *Hills like white elephants*, which could very easily be a transcript of a ‘real world’ conversation between a pregnant girl and her not very sensitive boyfriend. There are thousands of examples that prove this point; very illustrative descriptions of bullfight often found in Hemingway, factory workers and the rise of the show-biz entertainment described in Dreiser, hard life of miners community described in Lawrence etc.

What about the problem of imagination? If we think about it, it will become obvious that it is hard to write a story in which absolutely everything is imagined and false. For example, even if there is no Emma Bovary, there still remain descriptions of France, descriptions which reveal something about French countryside and Paris of the time. What is even more important, it is plausible to claim that personal relationships that take place in the story follow the real life relationship patterns, with all the relevant psychological, social, economical features. In the similar vein, *Old father Goriot* is very illuminative on the early nineteenth century life in Paris and the circumstances that students lived in. As John Gibson (2003) rightly observes, “... we can identify ‘real’ features of human experience and circumstances in the fabric of fictional narratives (...) for while fictional characters certainly are not real, the practices in which they engage are also our practices: they share a common structure”¹⁴. Lamarque

¹³ The imagined/real ratio will ultimately depend on the genre. (Auto) biographical, historical or realistic novels will obviously include much more real life data than sci-fi novels. However, in my view, a reader has some kind of idea to which genre the work he reads belongs to. Nobody is justified in believing that dogs can talk and spell after reading Dean Koontz's novel *Watchers*, but I believe no one would be tempted to reach that conclusion upon reading a novel.

¹⁴ Gibson, 2003, p. 225.

and Olsen (1994) put forward a similar idea, expressed in the principle of verisimilitude, according to which the real world and fictional worlds are rather similar in circumstances they describe; therefore the same description can be used for both of them¹⁵. This is the reason why, it seems to me, the fact that there is no Huckleberry Finn doesn't prevent us from gaining insight into the social circumstances of the slavery. On the other hand, the fact that our experience and fictional experience share a common structure is a reason for us to engage in literature and to look for a possible real life problems and solutions that we might find ourselves in.

Finally, how does literature, understood as fictional testimony, fulfill different cognitive values I identified earlier? To begin with, everyone admits that there are parts of fiction that are not imaginative at all. Lamarque (2009) refers to them as factual description¹⁶; these are the long parts of *Moby Dick* dealing with whales, Dreiser's descriptions of Chicago, Flaubert's description of France etc. Usually the 'role' of parts like this within a novel is to slow down the action, background the relevant setting, to account for the actions of the characters. Probably it is true that authors do not write these parts to transfer the truth, but that doesn't mean that there is nothing factual to learn from them. Of course, we *can* learn that through some other means, as Stolnitz claims, but that doesn't make it, as a source, invaluable or trivial. To use his example, in reading the *Bleak House* we get to learn that English legal system was rather slow. And he is right, this was known before Dickens wrote it, and it didn't become true because he wrote it. However, that certainly can be a new piece of knowledge for us, citizens of 21st century (we do not necessarily know how people lived in London in those days, nor do we know what Chicago was like in times of Dreiser of American south in times of Faulkner. But we can learn that by reading *Sister Carrie* or *The Sound and the Fury*). In that sense these parts trigger new knowledge. However, notice, even if this information could already be familiar to the reader, he could just look on it as confirmation of something he had already known. In non fictional testimony we are sometimes told things we already know. Think back to the glass example; I had known about the glass before your statement. But

¹⁵ However, Lamarque and Olsen reject the claim that this cognitive element is something we value in literature.

¹⁶ Lamarque, 2009, chs. 5, 6.

your statement can confirm my visual experience (yes, I've seen it"), or it can confirm the reliability of my memory ("Yes, I remember seeing it there").

However, there's more to fiction than factual descriptions. We can look at the more general level often called thematic level¹⁷, at which we are not concerned with descriptions of places, circumstances and customs, and we do not follow the plot of the story, but are rather concerned with identifying "human concerns and practices" described in the story. That means that at this level, the fact that there are no Othello, Iago and Desdemona, does not prevent the reader from gaining an insight into the destructiveness of such feelings like jealousy, lust and envy. Shakespeare brilliantly showed how manipulation works; just like in *Macbeth* he brilliantly portrays 'the evil that men do'. Of course, it is hard to phrase any kind of 'truth' that could be picked up at this level, and in that sense, Stolnitz's mocking attempts to identify the truth one can deduct from *Pride and Prejudice* rightly proves his point. However, I think that it would be wrong and perhaps even pointless to search for (propositional) truths at this level. What this level gives us is the opportunity to grasp how different issues (emotions, political ideologies, one's sexual or religious orientation etc) described within the story function and what they can do, how destructive they can be, or how powerless, devastated or cruel people can be when faced with them¹⁸.

Fictional testimony, taken as a whole, can present a kind of a thought experiment. For example, think of *The Brave New World*. Using thought experiments is very common method in scientific researches, so why would it not be acceptable to consider a fictional work as though experiment? Or, fiction can show us 'what is like' (to have a daughter who is dying from leukemia like in *My Sister Keeper*), it can raise the question of 'what if' (we

¹⁷ Lamarque and Olsen provide detailed account of thematic level in their 1994 masterpiece. Lamarque tackles the same issue in his 2009 (see esp. ch. 4). J. Gibson also speaks about thematic level (2003, p. 227), where he says: "(the thematic level), the level at which a literary work shapes and structures our understanding of the features of our world it brings to view. (...) But, at the thematic level (...) we find a way of conceiving how a work of literature can actually try to *tell* us something about the nature of our world" (p. 227). I believe Gibson has, in his 2003, brilliantly shown how that works.

¹⁸ Gibson explains this by analyzing *Othello* and the passion of jealousy; see Gibson 2003, p. 227-228.

lived in the society as the one described in 1984). Not only do we confirm our knowledge of something we already know (people may die of leukemia; there are extremely cruel political regimes), we actually get to see it from ‘the inside’, we are let ‘into the world’ in which that is true.

Fiction can also be used as a vehicle for testing different hypothesis, or for presenting different points of view on something. Critics often say that in *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoyevsky explores the final consequences of utilitarianism and the issue of whether or not killing can be permitted or justified. But even more than that, “Dostoevsky pinpointed the dangers of both utilitarianism and rationalism” and “He thus attacked a peculiar Russian blend of French utopian socialism and Benthamite utilitarianism.”¹⁹ The same is true of many other novels, and very often it is emphasized of *Anna Karenina*. At the surface level, it is a novel about unhappily married woman who decides to leave her husband and child and to go away with her lover. In that sense, it can give us a taste of what is like to feel such a passionate desire for someone. But even more than that, the value of the novel resides more in some other aspects, ones that we, the citizens of 21st century are not thus familiar with as we might be with passionate love. Here’s the critic again: “Also of significance is Tolstoy’s use of real events in his narrative, to lend greater verisimilitude to the fictional events of his narrative. Characters debate significant sociopolitical issues affecting Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, such as the place and role of the Russian peasant in society, education reform, and women’s rights. Characters often attend similar social functions to those which Tolstoy attended, and he includes in these passages his own observations of the ideologies, behaviors, and ideas running through contemporary Russia through the thoughts of Levin. The broad array of situations and ideas depicted in *Anna Karenina* allows Tolstoy to present a treatise on his era’s Russia, and, by virtue of its very breadth and depth, all of human society.” So, it becomes pointless to say, as Stolnitz does, that art has no reference to anything beyond itself. Art refers to real life and makes us question it over and over again, it makes us see different aspects of that reality, aspects that we might not have been aware of before, and it helps us un-

¹⁹ The references are taken from the Wikipedia entries *Crime and Punishment*. and *Anna Karenina* at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.

derstand it better, thus making us more aware of it. And that goes not just for reality, but for people as well. It is often admitted that fiction is great at psychological portrayals. Think of Dreiser's characters and the moral fall of Clyde Griffiths, or to go back to Dostoevsky, of a brilliant psychological portrayal of Raskolnikov. It might be true, as Lamarque and Olsen (1994) pointed out in connection to the Hamlet situation that "it is far too complex and specific"²⁰, but it nevertheless reveals something about human psychology, it challenges us to consider different aspects of it and even to try to understand them. This is particularly true in cases when the novel describes some issues the reader is, for variety of reasons, not very familiar with, or that are not common in the culture the reader comes from. For example, Hong Ying's *K: The art of love*, portrays the 1930's China, thus revealing different layers of its cultural and intellectual life, providing also an account of the ancient Taoist arts of love, sexuality and passion that might be unfamiliar to someone who is not from China. In the same manner, Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a mask* reveals a lot about Japanese culture, but even more than that, Mishima is excellent at portraying a homosexual man, trying to cope with himself. Of course, both of these novels are not confined to the geographical boundaries of China and Japan, at the thematic level they deal with issues that are of great importance for everybody, like love, passion, desire, sexuality, one's relation with others, with being accepted and/or rejected etc, and in that sense they serve a valuable function of giving us an insight into different aspects of human psychology and the way an individual copes with who he is.

V. Possible Objections

In this last part of my paper, I would like to answer some of the possible objections to the way I tried to save the cognitive value of art. My claim was that a literary work can be seen as a testimony, given the similarities that exist between things people tell us in everyday testimonial exchange and the structure of literary work. One reason why someone might find this unacceptable is the fact that we are primarily accustomed to treat literary work as work of art, which (due to the above mentioned problem of

²⁰ Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p. 378. Reprinted in Lamarque, 2009, p. 248

imagination) should not be subjected to, or even evaluated by, the same (epistemic) rules as some other practices. However, once we have decided to search for epistemic benefits of literature, treating literary work as a testimony gives us a way to epistemically anchor it in a safe place: the epistemic benefits we gain from literary work are similar to those we gain from things people tell us in everyday testimonial exchange, and testimonial exchange is epistemically recognized source of knowledge. This is only plausible if we recognize that the same restrictions are at work in both cases: in accepting non fictional and fictional testimony alike, there is 'epistemic work' that needs to be done by the audience in order for it to be justified in accepting the testimony. This epistemic work might include doing the back up check of the information presented, or of the reliability and sincerity of the informer²¹. What is important is that the audience should not 'trust blindly', that is, accept whatever is said as true. In the case of fictional testimony, this is partly acknowledged through the recognition of the genre and literary conventions: a reader knows, just through being part of the literary practice that some things are not to be taken literary.

From what I said so far, someone might be tempted to conclude that literary work is just as valid source of knowledge as some other sources, like sociology, psychology or other areas of research. This is wrong and I do not want to claim that. If someone were interested in learning about social circumstances regarding slavery, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *The Sound and the Fury* would not be — epistemically — the wisest choice. But, and this is important, that does not mean these literary works cannot be the source of knowledge for this issue, once someone takes up to read them. In a sense, learning something about slavery is a kind of a side-effect of reading these books, which in no way means that some other, primarily aesthetic effects are therefore belittled or neglected, or that some other sources, like sociology book, can be neglected. There are just different things that we are focused on. In reading scientific (non-fiction) literature, we are primarily concerned with gaining new information and finding arguments that support them. In fiction, we are more concerned with some aesthetic issues, like the manner of presentation, composition, stylistic devices etc. But that does not mean that we should be oblivious

²¹ For a more detailed account of 'epistemic work', see Lackey 2008.

towards cognitive effects that this kind of literature can have. Whereas in 'scientific' literature we can find elaborated accounts describing some phenomena, like historical accounts of Victorian England or Puritanism in America, it is when we read *The French Lieutenant's woman*, and *The Scarlet Letter* that we actually see the abstract propositions of scientific paper 'in action' and very often, it is the fictional way of presenting some phenomena that allows us to see it from the perspective of an individual. Literature has a brilliant ability to let us into the world it describes, and to bring closer its different aspects. This is something that scientific literature may sometimes lack. So rather than thinking in terms of either (science) or (literature), we should recognize different cognitive values each of these practices provide and take most of what we can from both of them!

VI. Conclusion

As I said before, we should not confine ourselves only to the pursuit of truth and propositional knowledge. There are other cognitive values we should strive towards, and fiction can be seen as a splendid vehicle for helping us reach them. Think how in science nothing is ever done and discovered fully, there are no firm answers and final conclusions, these days even the atoms get splintered into smaller particles and the scientific view of the world changes all the time. There's no reason not to apply that to our everyday lives and to our understanding of the world. There is always something new that we can built into our 'picture of the world', there are always some new things we haven't thought about yet, hypothesis that challenge what we think we know, and fiction can have a great role in highlighting these new 'hypotheses', in giving different perspective on something, in providing incentives to take a different stand. Someone may have very firm opinions on love and sexuality, but Houellebecq's analysis of the relation between the two is bound to shake them. This is where the cognitive value of the fiction gets in. In short, it helps us exercise our epistemic agency, the reflective part of ourselves, in a manner more deep and profound than any other human practice.

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