

Literature and Practical Knowledge

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Abstract

This article defends literary cognitivism, the view that literature can convey genuine propositional knowledge, in the form of propositions which are (i) true (ii) justified and (iii) have aesthetic value because they convey such knowledge. I reply to familiar objections to this view, and reformulate it as the thesis that literary knowledge is a form practical knowledge that is only derivatively propositional. I attempt to apply some ideas to be found in Stanley's and Williamson's conception of knowing how. Literary knowledge is a kind of practical knowing how of propositions involving demonstrative practical modes of presentation. This conception has often been criticized, rightly, for relying on a notion of knowing how that is too intellectualist. But in the case of literary knowledge, where we never get direct knowledge of experience or practice, and where our knowledge is always mediated by the properties of form and style, this drawback is actually a virtue.

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1. Introduction: Literary Cognitivism

Although nobody would deny that we learn a lot from reading literary works, as soon as one tries to say more precisely what it means to come to know something from them, the answers become elusive. There is after all a long tradition in literary criticism according to which the aim of literature is to bring us knowledge of the world and of human nature. It is often called "literary humanism". One can find typical expressions of this view in such declarations as Samuel Johnson's:

The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general; if it be false, it is a picture of nothing (Boswell 1837: 32).

One could find many similar claims in, for instance, writers like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and in literary critics like J. Benda (1945), F.R. Leavis (1948) or L.

Trilling (1950).¹ What seems to be distinctive of literary humanism is the insistence on the idea that there is such a thing as literary truth and literary knowledge. Many authors, however, are hostile to the view that there can be any kind of truth in literature. Thus Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen (1989, see also Lamarque 2008) defend what they call a “no-truth” view of literature, according to which what is distinctive of learning from literature is not the fact that it brings us certain kinds of truth, which we would have to know, but the fact that it rests on certain practices, which we would have to imitate. They do not want, however, to deny that the value of literature rests upon its promotion of various humanistic themes, which for them are mostly relative to the social values carried by the times, places and historical contexts from which literary works emerge and that they—directly or otherwise—describe. They insist nevertheless on being called “literary humanists” in this less than universalist sense. It is hard to see, however, how universal values and ideals such as truth, sincerity or justice, which are the traditional ones promoted by literary humanism, can be preserved in this relativistic framework: for how could these values transcend

¹ Some other examples among many such declarations:

“Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find” (Johnson 1765: 8).

“The picturesque contrasts of character in this play are almost as remarkable as the depth of the passion. The Moor Othello, the gentle Desdemona, the villain Iago, the good-natured Cassio, the fool Roderigo, present a range and variety of character as striking and palpable as that produced by the opposition of costume in a picture. Their distinguishing qualities stand out to the mind's eye, so that even when we are not thinking of their actions or sentiments, the idea of their persons is still as present to us as ever. These characters and the images they stamp upon the mind are the farthest asunder possible, the distance between them is immense: yet the compass of knowledge and invention which the poet has shown in embodying these extreme creations of his genius is only greater than the truth and felicity with which he has identified each character with itself, or blended their different qualities together in the same story” (Hazlitt 1916: 33).

“It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong, IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life, must know it to be so. From the first introduction of that poor wretch, to her laying her bloodstained head upon the robber's breast, there is not a word exaggerated or over-wrought” (Dickens 1999: lvii).

“A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect (Conrad 1914: 12).

“The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of the painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honour of one is the honour of another” (James 1884: 46).

the social and historical boundaries to which they are supposed, on this view, to be attached?

The view that I try to defend here shares with the traditional form of literary humanism the idea that there are literary truths and literary knowledge, in the most straightforward and literal senses of the words “truth” and “knowledge”. I propose to call this view *literary cognitivism* (LC) and to define it by at least the following three theses:

- (i) *Truth condition*: All genuine literary works express general truths about the world and about human nature.
- (ii) *Knowledge condition*: Some literary works have a cognitive value in the sense that they express knowable truths and are able to impart them.
- (iii) *Aesthetic value condition*: This cognitive value is essential to the aesthetic value of these works.

In what follows, I shall first try to reply to familiar objections against this view. Those who are impressed by these objections have concluded that if knowledge can be conveyed by literary works at all, it cannot be a form of theoretical propositional knowledge, but a form of practical knowledge. This view, however, is very elusive. I reformulate it through an account that tries to reconcile the propositional character of literary knowledge with its practical character.

2. Versions of Literary Cognitivism

It is hard to deal with these issues without begging all sorts of questions about the nature of literature, the nature of truth and the nature of knowledge. First, one thing needs to be said about the scope of “literary”. “Literature”, as Lamarque and Olsen (1989: 24-25) insist is, unlike “fiction” or “narrative”, a normative or evaluative term and not a descriptive one. So “genuine literary works” is question begging if one postulates that genuine literary works do have a cognitive value. Why consider Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Conrad or Proust as more worthy of this characterization than Barbara Cartland, J.K. Rowling or Paulo Coelho? Who knows? Some people consider *The Lord of the Rings* as a much better epic than *The Iliad* and some seem to value *Harry Potter* more highly than Robert Louis Stevenson’s or Conan Doyle’s novels. The only answer that I can give is that classics are *prima facie* better candidates against sceptics, just as “I have hands” or “The earth was not created yesterday” is a better candidate for something known for certain than “Julius Cesar had a cold when he crossed the Rubicon” or “Julius is the guy who invented the zip”. Indeed I cannot prove that J.K. Rowling will stand the test of time and that her novels will lead to the production of as many works of literary criticism as Marcel Proust or Samuel Beckett, but for the time being, I have a better—even if not perfect—guarantee (and plausibly tied to a certain kind of institutional setting, time, practice, etc.) that the latter belongs to literature and not the former. Some may attach to literature values other than the cognitive—in particular emotional value—and for that reason may prefer *Harry Potter* to *La recherche*, but they would equally beg the question in assuming that emotional value is independent of cognitive value. They also would be wrong to think that the *Commedia*, for instance, carries less emotion than, say, *The Da Vinci Code*. LC indeed does not say that any kind of work that aspires to being a piece of literary writing conveys knowledge. It only says that some works at least can achieve this goal.

Second, the plausibility of LC may seem to depend also on literary genres. It is less clear that it applies to lyrical poetry like Byron's *Childe Harold* or to gothic novels like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* than to historical narratives like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* or to pieces of literary journalism like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Everything depends upon the notions of knowledge and truth that are question. The notion of truth is used in many diverse senses according to the literary genre to which it is applied. There is a notion of truth that is said to be proper to poetry alone. According to the romantic conception of literature in particular, poetry is the vehicle of a kind of transcendent or essential truth that can be reached through some sort of mystical intuition or revelation. On this view, Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht* or Mallarmé's *Poésies* contain more, and better, truths than any piece of prose. Zola, for his own part, meant to write "experimental novels" and to elevate literature to an almost scientific description of characters in their biological and social setting. Other writers, such as Paul Bourget, intended to contribute to psychological science. But do we want to restrict our notion of literary cognitivism to these specific enterprises? Post-modernism and literary formalism have made us familiar with the idea that literature describes worlds where no notion of truth or reference whatsoever can apply, or, if they do, such a notion rests upon its own and specific kind of truth, "truth-in-fiction", or "novelistic truth", which has nothing in common with ordinary, garden-variety, truth. Neither do we want to tie literary cognitivism to the idea that a number of true statements often occur, among others, in fictional narratives, such as the first sentence of the *Chartreuse de Parme*, "On the 15th of May, 1796, General Bonaparte marched into the city of Milan", or the first sentence of *La recherche du temps perdu*, "Longtemps je suis couché de bonne heure", which is probably true (but of whom? That is a more difficult question). Clearly if LC is to make sense, one has to say upon what kind of notion of truth it rests.

So there are quite a number of versions of literary cognitivism, depending on the notions of truth and knowledge that one is committed to. Let us start with what appears to be the strongest condition, the knowledge condition (ii).

The notion of "cognitive value" of a literary work of art is vague indeed. Very often it means that fictions, narratives or other kinds of literary works are apt to lead readers to infer, or perhaps to consider, through some form of imaginative understanding, a number of beliefs. Many of these beliefs, on whatever subjects—say moral beliefs, or beliefs about human psychology—may be true, hence have a cognitive value. Similarly the work of imagination can enhance our cognitive powers. It is not clear, however, that literary works can do so by leading us to form *new* beliefs, let alone new true beliefs. If on the basis of reading Kipling's *The Man who would be King*, I form the belief that *Kafiristan* is a country located in the mountains north of Afghanistan, do I form a belief that is true? No. But I can form a belief that there is such a country, or I can try to identify Tajikistan under the fictional name of Kafiristan. But not all beliefs are so empirical. If on the basis of reading *Effi Briest*, I form the belief that women are oppressed in marriage, it may not be something that I *learn* from the novel or from that novel only. It is not clear that I form a new belief, and many have argued that the only kind of knowledge that one can find in literary works is based on previously acquired beliefs or knowledge, hence is more a form of recognition than a form of cognition (Stolnitz 1992). Moreover how could I identify the truth that marriage is oppressive to women in Fontane's novel if I had no knowledge of social relationships in nineteenth century Germany? And is it the

same knowledge as the one I form through reading *Middlemarch*? The idea is present in a number of views according to which literature brings a cognitive strengthening of what we already know, but not *new* knowledge.² The same idea is much present in a simple form in contemporary analyses of fiction. Thus David Lewis famously remarks about fiction:

Most of us are content to read a fiction against a background of well-known fact, “reading into” the fiction content that is not there explicitly but that comes jointly from the explicit content and the factual background (Lewis 1975: 268).

And Lewis suggests that fictions are pieces of counterfactual reasoning:

Reasoning about truth in fiction is like counterfactual reasoning: we make a supposition contrary to fact and [...] we depart from actuality as far as we must to reach a possible world where the counterfactual supposition comes true (*ibid.*: 269),

or, in terms of beliefs, we form hypothetically a given belief and see, on the assumption that it is true (or probable), whether a consequent belief is true (probable) or compatible with the first.³ This view is often associated to the familiar idea that fictional narratives involve thought experiments whereby we are invited to ask ourselves the question: “what if...?” and to try to imagine what would be the case if one entertained the supposition described in the antecedent of a conditional. Indeed if thought experiments can sometimes contribute to the formation of scientific or philosophical theories, it is tempting to suggest that fictional narratives, in so far as they involve thought experiments, can contribute to the formation of knowledge. But how this is achieved is a moot question.⁴

It is one thing for a piece of literary work to contribute to the formation of beliefs, including true ones, or even to contribute in some way to the formation of knowledge—for instance by suggesting important hypotheses—and it is another thing to be a genuine *source* of knowledge, and quite another thing again to *impart*, or to *transmit* knowledge in the way ordinary learning is supposed to do. It is yet another thing to be accidentally a vehicle of a true belief or of knowledge—as for instance when I overhear someone saying something that turns out to be true and I come to believe it—and to be *essentially* a source of knowledge or to constitute a form of knowledge. Presumably many of those who claim that they “learn” from literature have only the former—weak—sense in mind, which is insufficient for granting that literature has cognitive value.

If literary cognitivism is to have some bite—if it is not to be trivial or empty—the notion of knowledge involved in thesis (ii) had better be robust. In other words, it had better coincide with the ordinary common sense notion of knowledge, which involves the condition that a belief be not only true, but also justified or warranted.⁵ Now the ordinary notion of knowledge applies, first and

² Carroll 1998, Gibson 2009. The idea is indeed familiar from philosophical hermeneutics.

³ Anyone familiar with the literature on conditionals will recognize the so-called Ramsey’s test on conditionals.

⁴ On this point, see Lombardo 2012, Engel 2012, Ch. 5.

⁵ *Pace* some experimental psychologists’ claim to the contrary. Indeed that knowledge can be so *defined* is another matter. Currie to appear studies various ways in which we can get

foremost, to *propositional* knowledge, which involves a relation to propositions (whether expressed by sentences or not) that can be true or false. Knowledge in the ordinary sense, being factive—to know that P entails that P is true. Let us call this view the *strong* form of literary cognitivism.

Before examining this point, we must say something about the notion of truth involved. The strong form of literary cognitivism has to go with a notion of truth which is robust enough to be applied to propositions that can be true and known, lest we beg the question by implicitly accepting a weaker notion of knowledge (say, as cognitive improvement of the reader) or a weaker notion of truth. Some notions of truth are so weak or so shallow that they apply to many forms of discourse, from ethics to fiction, from aesthetic truths to scientific truths to commonsense truths or to comic truths. If, for instance, we accept that there are fictional truths, moral truths, legal truths, mathematical truths, and so on and so forth, and as many truths as there are possible objects of discourse, the concept of truth becomes completely trivial, and there is no way to distinguish the domains where it applies from those where it does not apply. Deflationists about truth, who say that “true” applies wherever we can apply the equivalence schema “P is true if and only if P”, will agree and will welcome that conclusion.⁶ They tell us that if we can talk of fictional truths at all, then indeed we can frame such equivalences as “‘Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street’ is true if and only if Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street”. Such sentences tell us nothing about whether there can be fictional truths if we assume from the start that they are true *in fiction*, and similarly for all kinds of truths. Or if we are ready to talk about comic truths, that “‘Charlie Chaplin is funnier than Groucho Marx’ is true if and only if Charlie Chaplin is funnier than Groucho Marx”. Such equivalences would mean that our schema is relative to a domain, or to a framework, or to a kind of discourse, and it would follow that there are as many kinds of truth as kinds of discourse.⁷ If we do not want to trivialize truth in this way, we must accept that the concept of truth carries more weight and does not reduce to the innocuous equivalence between “P” and “it is true that P” (in such and such domain, for such and such discourse). We must accept the idea, implicit in the schema “P is true if and only if P” or “the proposition that P is true if and only if P”, that the right-hand side of these schemata tells us something about what has to be the case *in the world*—the actual world, and not in some fictional or legal, or moral, etc. world—for the sentence or proposition of the left-hand side to be true. In other words one has to accept that truth involves at least the idea that for a proposition to be true there must be something in virtue of which it is true, hence that truth involves some sort of relation (of correspondence or other) between what a statement describes and the way things are. We need not spell out what kind of concept of truth this implies, but we must at least accept that if a statement is true, it obeys a certain minimal set of platitudes: the equivalence principle “P is true if and only if P”, the fact that truth is the aim of assertion and belief, that it is objective and independent of our investigations at least in the sense that a statement can be justified but not true, and

beliefs from fiction. But he is skeptical about our ability to get genuine knowledge from them.

⁶ E.g. Horwich 1991, Rorty 1991.

⁷ This is what is sometimes called “alethic pluralism”. For familiar objections to it, see Engel 2009, Lynch 2009.

that statements are true if and only if they describe things the way they are.⁸ In other words, and in so far as these platitudes entail that the notion of truth involved is the ordinary one, the notion of truth has to be robust. The same argument applies to the notion of knowledge. We can have a very shallow notion of knowledge, according to which wherever there is a justified true belief of any kind, there is knowledge. Thus if we are in some sense justified (say, by the number of laughs) to say that it is true that Charlie Chaplin is funnier than Groucho Marx, then we can say that we *know* that Charlie Chaplin is funnier than Groucho Marx. Knowledge is usually associated with standards of justification, which can be high or low. But if we accept that any standard of justification, however low, counts for a true belief to be knowledge, then the notion of knowledge trivially applies virtually to every truth, hence to literary truth, provided that there is such a thing.

A belief, however, to be apt to be knowledge, must at least be true. So even when the notion of truth is reduced to these platitudes it seems always to be *too* robust to be applied to literary discourse, and in particular to fictional narratives. How can one claim that literature brings cognitive content which can be knowledge *in virtue of the fact that it is most of the time intrinsically fictional and does not aim at truth*? Fiction is by definition non-veridical and non-referential. So how can it be knowledge *in virtue of its suspension of reference and truth*? Putting the bar of cognitive value so high seems to raise immediately the threat of scepticism with respect to literary cognitivism.

LC certainly cannot be true in the sense that all sentences of a literary work of art are supposed to be true, unless one means to restrict the thesis only to works with truth-telling objectives, such as historical narratives, reports, journalism, or literary and philosophical essays, and if we suppose (which is not obvious) that these kinds of writings actually aim only at expressing truth and are all truth-apt. Nor, as we have seen, is LC the thesis that the poets have to be expelled from the city, and that literature has to become a sort of science.⁹ So the propositional truths that feature in a literary work cannot be those expressed by its very sentences, even when they happen to be true as a matter of fact (as when one reads in a novel: "Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939"). They must be general truths that the reader, whether or not they are intended by the writer, believes that the literary work in some sense expresses or contains, and that he can extract from it. This is the view which is often called the "message" conception of literature. Lamarque and Olsen call it "The Propositional Theory of Literary Truth":

The literary work contains or implies general thematic statements about the world which the reader as part of an appreciation of the work has to assess as true or false. The theory

⁸ For this approach to truth, see Wright 1993, Lynch 2009. Among the platitudes the correspondence platitude is prominent. Approaches to truth through the platitudes are often associated to a pluralistic view of truth (see Lynch 2009), according to which truth may conform to the platitudes in general, but can be "realized" in different ways depending on the domain. The thought then would be that, unlike, say, in physics or mathematics, truth in literature could be a form of coherence rather than a form of correspondence. This is not the view that I intend to defend, when I say that our concept of truth in literature has to be robust. I take it as a correspondence truth here too. Thanks to Michael Lynch for having pointed this out to me.

⁹ As Benda (1945) sometimes suggests. See Engel 2012.

presents two claims. First, a literary work implies propositions which can be construed as general propositions about the world. Second, these propositions are to be construed as involved in true or false claims about the world. In the terminology of *theme* and *thesis* the theory would be that a literary work develops not only a theme but also a thesis and that part of the appreciation of a literary work as a work of art is an assessment of the truth-value of this thesis (Lamarque and Olsen 1989: 325).

For instance, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the Lydgate story, according to Eliot herself, shows that "the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control". Such general, indeed rather banal, truths are very often taken to be psychological laws of human nature. They very often form the content of the moral knowledge that is, on many classical and contemporary views, conveyed by literature.

The problem with the Propositional theory, as Lamarque and Olsen argue, is that thematic statements, explicit as well as implicit, can be assigned significance and thus be understood without being construed as *asserted* (1989: 328). This raises three kinds of problems.

a) The first may be called the *interpretation* problem: how are the themes or general truths expressed by a literary text, and if they are implicit, how are they accessed by the reader who is supposed to retrieve or extract them? Presumably through a process of interpretation, but how does it work?

b) The second may be called the problem of *triviality*, just indicated about Eliot's declaration about Lydgate. Whether or not these general truths are explicit, they are bound to be in many ways humdrum and trivial, as most take home messages which one can get from famous novels, such as: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way", "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife". Or even more platitudinously: "provincial life is boring", "human nature is bad", "life is often made of difficult choices", "It is no good to stay in bed all day"; etc. If it is the role of literature to bring to us such trivialities, or at best to repeat proverbs from the wisdom of nations, its knowledge content is very poor indeed.

c) The third objection is related to the previous ones. Suppose that the message or theme is complex and informative—rather than dull or trivial—and that it brings us some deep and complex truths about human nature. If it does, in what sense can it do so independently of the form and style of the literary work? A common version of this objection can be called the problem of *paraphrase*: if a literary work is to deliver a specific knowledge content, this content must be apt to being expressed in other, presumably more accessible, terms. But if literary works and fictions were paraphrasable into plain truth-aimed prose, the literary form—what gives to the work its aesthetic value—would be lost. The style, the writing—everything that makes for the value of a literary work—will be inessential, and only the content will be attended to. Not only, as most literary critics have argued, is it very dubious that one can so separate form and content in a literary work, but even if we could do so, it would be a complete misrepresentation of the nature of literary work. If, more plausibly, the general truths that are supposed to be transferred by literary works are, so to say, embedded within the narrative, how can the knowledge of human nature that they are meant to confer be separated off from its incarnation in the story? If it is not incarnated, our

interpretation is false. If it is, the separation of form from content makes it useless: why would writers care to write novels or stories if their take-home message can be paraphrased in other terms? And why would readers care to read these? George Eliot, who was a stern defender of literary cognitivism, states this dilemma quite well:

Suppose a language which had no uncertainty, no whims of idiom, no cumbrous form, no fitful shimmer of many hued significance, no hoary archaisms “familiar with forgotten years”—a patent deodorized and non resonant language which effects the purpose of communication as perfectly and rapidly as algebraic signs. Your language may be perfect medium of expression to science, but it will never express life, which is a great deal more than science (Eliot 1883: 287-88).

Eliot here formulates clearly the principle (iii) of LC: it is *in virtue of its being fiction*, that is, in virtue of its *stylistic form* and as the bearer of *aesthetic value* that a literary work carries cognitive value. Eliot, however, does not tell us *how* a literary work can “express life” and thus be a source of knowledge.

Although they are most common, it is not clear that these objections from interpretation, triviality and paraphrase are actually damaging for LC. For literary works, if they are meant to have cognitive value and to carry knowledge, do not wear, so to say, their content on their sleeves. Readers and literary critics have to extract it. If this content consists in general themes about human nature or the world, it might be universal to the point of being trivial. Actually the rich tradition of *ethopeia*, the description of human characters, from Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Theophrastus’ *Characters*, to the French and British moralists and to Jane Austen and George Eliot, rests upon the description of stable and well-known features of human nature.¹⁰ Ambition, jealousy, greed, pride are everywhere the same, in spite of the variety of situations and of people who exemplify them. What we learn from the repetition of these features may be quite dull. When in *Middlemarch* we read the Lydgate story, do we really learn that “the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control”? We do not actually learn this from the story, as a lesson, or a message conveyed by it and which could be conveyed by other means (for instance by a philosophical treatise). What we learn in reading novels, or comedies, that bear on these general features of human nature is *how to recognize* the theme in the story, and *how* it is exemplified by these characters in this particular setting. We learn, in other words, that *this is the way* in which human hopes are thwarted by forces beyond human control. The literary work *shows, expresses or displays* the theme or maxim in question. It does not articulate it, or explain it explicitly and propositionally. For this reason a number of writers have suggested that if literary works impart or transmit knowledge, this cannot be a piece of theoretical knowledge, expressed by propositions, but a form of *practical* knowledge.

To summarise the points advanced in this section, we can represent them in the form of two dilemmas.

The first dilemma involves a choice between a weak and a strong form of literary cognitivism:

- (A) If on the one hand, one opts for a weak form of literary cognitivism, according to which there is literary knowledge, but only in the sense of

¹⁰ On this tradition see in particular Van Delft 2012, Carnevali 2010.

gaining, through literary work a capacity to form new beliefs, including true ones, perhaps through some form of inference or some sort of activity of the imagination, or a capacity to reflect on the beliefs that we already have, then it is dubious that these capacities give us a kind of knowledge, in the sense of a justified true belief. At best we enlarge our cognitive capacities. But this does not amount to gaining actual *knowledge*.

- (B) If, on the other hand, we opt for a strong form of knowledge (as justified true belief), then we are led to scepticism about literary fiction knowledge: for how can a work of fiction aim at producing knowledge of the ordinary sort and have an aesthetic value?

The second dilemma is between a propositional and a practical view of literary knowledge:

1. If there is literary knowledge, it has to be propositional.
2. But if literary knowledge is propositional, literature cannot provide such knowledge.
3. So either there is no literary knowledge or literary knowledge is not propositional.

To this second dilemma I now turn.¹¹

3. Literature and Practical Knowledge

In the light of these difficulties for the propositional theory of literary knowledge, many writers who nevertheless insist that there is such a thing as literary knowledge have argued that the kind of knowledge that is brought by literary works cannot be of the same kind as the knowledge that consists in information, a body of truths, of a propositional or of a theoretical sort. They have argued that literature is not a way of doing philosophy, ethics, history, journalism or science by other means, but that it does not follow that it does not convey a form of knowledge, yet one that does not consist in the expression of beliefs and of truths. They have held that the knowledge in question is practical, a form of *knowing how* rather than a form of knowing that. These claims have taken various forms, all supposed to rest on a strong contrast between the cognitive benefits of learning from literature and its practical effects. Three kinds of claims in particular have been made.

a) First it has been said that literary works involve not only the exercise of imagination, often under the form of a kind of projection or mental simulation, or a form of empathy involving a capacity of readers to share emotions and feelings with the characters depicted in fiction (Walton 1986, Currie 1990, 2010), but also the capacity to *enlarge* our imagination through fictions and narratives. This kind of empathy can involve a form of imagination that is voluntary, creative and recreative (Currie and Ravenscroft 2008). But it can also involve a form of direct participation, a capacity of immediate identification with the characters

¹¹ Gaskin (2013) defends a version of literary humanism or cognitivism which is distinct from both Lamarque and Olsen no truth view and the practicalist version presented here. Gaskin holds that literature does convey truth and knowledge about the world. But this thesis is defended on the assumption that the world is itself propositionally structured, which he calls linguistic idealism. A number of Gaskin's arguments could be adapted here, but I do not want to defend literary cognitivism at this cost.

and feelings described in stories, which has often been called “learning what it is like” to be a certain sort of person in a certain sort of situation.

b) It has been said also that literary fictions give us a capacity to see and to understand human situations, by giving us some new vision of life (Murdoch 1997). Thus Putnam writes about Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* that in reading this novel he does not “learn that love does not exist, that all beings are hateful and hating [...] What I learn is to see the world as it looks to the eyes of someone who is sure that that hypothesis is correct” (Putnam 1978: 89). Thus Jacques Bouveresse writes:

If one can derive any knowledge, in particular knowledge of human beings from our acquaintance with a literary work, it seems to consist only in some sort of practical knowledge. What teaching and learning look like has nothing to do with the communication of a theory, including the kind of theory that the author may be able to develop by himself. It’s only because literature is probably the most appropriate means to express, without falsifying them, the indeterminacy and the complexity of moral life that it can learn to us something essential in this domain. To take up Wittgenstein’s phrase, it can help us to watch and to see many more things than what ordinary life would allow us to watch and to see—at the very moment when we are tempted, a bit too early and too fast, to think (Bouveresse 2008: 54).

c) It has been argued that literary works can make us improve our capacities or give us some skills through some sort of training or education akin to a drill but also to some kind of formative process or *Bildung*:

While it is often assumed that fictions must be informative or morally improving in order to be of any real benefit to us, certain texts defy this assumption by functioning as training grounds for the capacities: in engaging with them, we stand to become not more knowledgeable or more virtuous but more skilled, whether at rational thinking, at maintaining necessary illusions, at achieving tranquillity of mind, or even at religious faith. Instead of offering us propositional knowledge, these texts yield know-how; rather than attempting to instruct by means of their content, they hone capacities by means of their form; far from seducing with the promise of instantaneous transformation, they recognize, with Aristotle, that change is a matter of sustained and patient practice [...] Increased agility makes us better at doing what the text expects of us, which in turn leads to still greater agility not just as reader but, more generally, as liver of a life. Thus rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what such texts give us is know-how; rather than offering us a new set of beliefs, what they equip us with are skills; rather than teaching, what they do is train. They are not informative, that is, but formative. They present themselves as spiritual exercises (whether sacred or profane), spaces for prolonged and active encounters which serve, over time, to hone our abilities and thus, in the end, to help us become who we are (Landy 2012: 12).

Such claims, which are by no means equivalent, are in many ways puzzling. In the first place, if the exercises of imagination involved in claim a) are supposed to be cases of *knowing how*, and if *knowing how* is understood, along the classical lines of Ryle (1946), as distinct from and irreducible to *knowing that*, it is not clear that they involve contents completely alien to propositional and con-

ceptual understanding. Typically, the ambiguous phrase “what it is like” may refer to an experience, of a qualitative sort, accessed in the first person—as the experience of a colour or of a taste—and which is indeed—at least on most views of *qualia*—non-propositional and non-conceptual. But it may also refer to a habit or a disposition to have this kind of experience, which may also involve capacities of recognition that are not purely experiential. It is clear that someone who experiences what it is like to eat a pineapple for the first time learns from this experience, but can we transpose this claim to a reader of a novel who “experiences”, through his reading of, say, Solzhenitsyn’s *A day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* what it is like to be a prisoner in the Gulag? By definition the experience is conveyed to the reader in a way in which the taste of the pineapple cannot be conveyed. It has to be the description of an experience, not the experience itself. If it is conveyed to the reader, it is through an indirect description, under the form of a testimony, not through some direct experience. Some philosophers hold that “knowing what it is like” can be reduced to a form of knowing how (Lewis 1990, Nemirow 1990). But it does not follow that this can be transposed to a literary “what it is like”. In the second place, if the kind of knowing-how is a form of knowing how human beings live, or knowledge of a form of life, it is bound to be quite elusive, so elusive indeed that it can be doubted that it is a form of knowledge at all. What is knowledge that “expresses the complexity of life” with all its “indeterminacy”, and that learns “to watch and to see”? What would be a knowing how about *life* in general? The claim that it is life as a whole that we learn through literary works actually comes close to the view that it conveys no knowledge at all, and seems rather to express a form of skepticism about the cognitive value of literature. The capacities and skills which Landy claims to constitute the literary knowing-how seem to be more specific, but it is not clear what kinds of skills and know-hows are conveyed by literary texts. They cannot be particular pieces of physical or technical know-hows, such as knowing how to ride a bicycle, sailing, playing a musical instrument or using a tool. I cannot learn how to sail by reading Conrad’s novels, or how to commit a murder by reading detective stories (although I can learn quite a number of facts about these activities). It seems clear, as Landy says, that they have more to do with the exercise of certain intellectual capacities and activities, such as imagining, thinking, reasoning, or with the capacity to recognize certain emotions or feelings and to be able to transfer these from the characters and situations to one’s own case. But the further these are from the exercise of a physical aptitude, the harder it is to believe that they do not involve any kind of propositional knowledge. For instance learning skills in “rational thinking” or “maintaining necessary illusions” can hardly pass for a piece of knowing-how involving no propositional or conceptual competence. The same holds for the exercise of imagination referred to in claim (a): some imaginings are better described as exercises of counterfactual reasoning (in Lewis’s sense quoted above) than as cases of direct empathy. Ryle (1949) famously argued that mental states, such as desires, beliefs or intentions are better conceived as dispositions to act. But he also argued that no mental state can be defined by a single disposition, and that it must consist in a, perhaps open-ended, set of disposition. If the same holds of literary practical knowledge, it is very likely that the number of dispositions that are manifested by it is equally diverse and open-ended.

This is all the more true about a fourth d) conception of practical knowledge, invoked by Nussbaum in particular, and modelled on Aristotle’s

conception of practical reasoning, according to which this knowledge is the product of a practical syllogism, with a particular premise, a general law and where the conclusion is an action. Such reasoning is not a form of non-propositional knowing-how. On the contrary it involves the exercise of practical judgement, and of deliberation on the basis of reasons.

In spite of the fact that the claims (a)-(d) are rather distinct, let us call this set of views *practicalism about literary knowledge*. Many theorists of literature have found this view much more plausible than literary cognitivism. But it seems that it cannot be reconciled with propositionalism. Indeed the following set of claims, made by those who take literature to impart practical knowledge *and* to impart moral *truths* seems inconsistent:

- (i) Literary works aim at producing general truths about human life.
- (ii) Literature conveys some kind of moral knowledge.
- (ii) This kind of knowledge is practical knowledge.

How can the moral knowledge imparted by literature be both a set of truths about human life and a kind of practical knowledge?¹² If we want to make them consistent, we have either to renounce propositionalism or to reject practicalism. These claims, are, however, consistent, if one rejects the Rylean view of practical knowledge. Here I want to defend practicalism, but I want to argue that it is not incompatible with literary cognitivism. Literary knowledge is not a kind of knowledge that is *directly* theoretical and propositional: literary works and fiction do not aim at producing statements, whether explicit or not, that have a truth value and that are justified by reasons. It does not follow, however, that LC is wrong. Literary works can impart knowledge which is *both practical and propositional*.

4. Intellectualism about Literary Knowledge

I have suggested that the practicalist's claim that literary knowledge consists in a form of knowing-how encounters immediate difficulties if one insists, in Rylean fashion, upon drawing a sharp distinction between propositional and theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and practical knowledge on the other hand. But the boundaries between the two kinds of knowledge might not be so clear, as Stanley and Williamson (2001) have argued. I shall not here deal with their much discussed arguments in detail, and content myself with summarizing them.¹³ First they argue that Ryle's regress argument, according to which practical knowledge cannot rest upon the prior contemplation of a proposition is misguided. Second, a number of typical cases of *knowing how*, such as knowing how to fix a car, to find one's way in a city, or to sail a boat, may depend on previously acquired propositional knowledge. Third, and this their main argument, they claim that in English and in German at least the *wh*-constructions that serve to express knowing-how have a deep syntax or logical form which does not differ from that of constructions that serve to express knowing-that. In other words *knowing-how* constructions should not be parsed on the scheme of verb-phrase + infinitive, but on the scheme of an indirect or "embedded" question, wherein X

¹² Bouveresse (2008) makes this puzzling set of claims (I)-(III), which are inconsistent. See Engel 2012, Ch. 5.

¹³ For discussions of these arguments, see in particular Rumfit 2012, Benson and Moffett 2012, Hornsby 2012, Wiggins 2012.

is said to know the answer (or an answer) to the direct question: ‘How is one to ϕ ?’ So sentences such as

(1) Hannah knows how to ride a bicycle

should be parsed as belonging to a family of sentences of the form:

- (a) Hannah knows whom to call for help in a fire
- (b) Hannah knows why to vote for Gore

where “knows” has a propositional, hence truth-evaluable, complement. Stanley and Williamson take this as showing that there are strong grounds for reducing knowing *how* to knowing *that*. They give an analysis of knowing-how in terms of “practical modes of presentation”, which are a variety of demonstrative Fregean senses, “ways” of doing this or that in a contextual setting. To know how to ϕ is to know a *way* of ϕ -ing, which is a practical mode of presentation for ϕ -ing:

X knows how to ϕ iff for some [contextually relevant] way w which is a way for X to ϕ , there is a practical mode of presentation m , such that X knows under m that w is a way for her to ϕ (Stanley and Williamson 2000: 428).

In this sense for them the upshot of their analysis is that:

The analysis is thoroughly intellectualist; knowing how to F is a matter of having propositional knowledge. Like *all* knowledge attributions, intuitive judgments about the truth or falsity of such judgments are sensitive not just to the components of the proposition putatively known, but also to the way in which the subject thinks of them (Stanley 2011: 202).

So on this view, there are strong grounds for reducing practical knowledge to propositional knowledge.

There are, however, strong objections to Stanley’s and Williamson’s view.¹⁴ On the linguistic side, if their view is supposed to rest, at least in part, on the semantics of natural language constructions, Rumfit’s (2003) objection carries weight. Rumfit notes that the grounds for reducing *know how* constructions to *know that* and *know wh-* constructions are slight: French and Russian construct know how with infinitives rather than with *wh-* sentences but French allows both:

- (i) Jean sait préparer la tarte tatin (*Jean knows how to prepare tarte tatin*).
- (ii) Jean sait préparer la tarte tatin avec un four micro-ondes (*Jean knows how to prepare tarte tatin with a micro-wave*).

The infinitive construction is not the same as the *wh-* interrogative one, although it is no less natural in French and Russian. This threatens Stanley’s and Williamson’s claim that the interrogative is the deep structure of knowing-how ascriptions.¹⁵

A second objection is that the linguistic expressions of knowing *how*, even when they turn out to be expressed with propositions, do not necessarily reflect the nature of the practical knowledge involved. These may well be, in Ryle’s

¹⁴ A number of these objections can be found in the essays in Bengson and Moffett 2012.

¹⁵ I shall not here consider the twists and turns of this debate, in Stanley 2011 and 2011a.

phrase, the “stepchildren” of practical knowledge. This idea is voiced by David Wiggins:

A ship’s pilot who is retained by the maritime authorities to bring large ships safely to anchor in an awkward or difficult harbour can tell us, on the basis of his competence and experience, that when the wind is from the north and the tide is running out, the best thing to do is to steer straight for such-and-such a church tower until one is well past a certain bend in the channel. Almost anyone can come to possess that propositional knowledge but the information they get in this way will probably rest indispensably upon the experience and practical knowledge of a handful of people with a different kind of knowledge, namely practical or (as I shall suggest we say) agential knowledge. The propositional knowledge is the stepchild (if I may borrow Ryle’s own metaphor—see his 1945, 6, par. 25) of the pilot’s practical or agential knowledge (Wiggins 2012: 109).

In other words, we may express the practical knowledge in propositional form, although it is in its nature a much more complex phenomenon, constituted by a set of abilities which need not be answers to specific propositionally expressed questions, which in some sense condense these abilities, without our being able to *read off* this practical knowledge from its linguistic expression. A related remark is that knowing how to ϕ may not amount to knowing one way of ϕ -ing, but a set of ways of ϕ -ing. It is not clear which one is referred to when one says that X knows how to ϕ .

A third objection, also related to the foregoing is that the practical modes of presentation do not have the proper level of generality. A person can successfully manage to type a word, say “Afghanistan”, although be just lucky at getting the proper result, whereas another can do the very same thing successfully, but out of a skilled practice. They both know “how to type ‘Afghanistan’” and they know ways of doing just this, but their ways or practical modes of presentation are very different. Alternatively a person can know a way, say, to prune roses, but exercise this practical mode of presentation in different ways. What is known by a person who knows how to ϕ needs to be somehow *generic*, and that is why it cannot be captured by citing particular instances of the person’s ϕ -ing (Hornsby 2012).

There are a number of other objections, with which I am not going to deal here, that show that Stanley and Williamson’s intellectualist conception of practical knowledge is not likely to succeed.¹⁶ The upshot of these objections is that knowing a practical mode of presentation for ϕ -ing (a way to ride a bike, to cook a meal, to whistle with one’s fingers, to do a French kiss, etc.) is not knowing how to ϕ . It is only a demonstrative *description* of a knowing how. Jane may know *a way to ride a bike* without knowing *how to ride a bike*. A demonstrative description of ϕ -ing may be a good summary, or a good guide for a successful ability or a knowing how to ϕ , but it need not be a piece of knowledge of how to ϕ . What the practical modes of presentation give us are a best partial and *indirect* descriptions of knowing-how. But knowing-how does not consist in these modes of presentation, and these do not impart practical knowledge. By “indirect” I

¹⁶ Another interesting objection is that practical knowledge, unlike propositional knowledge, cannot be Gettierised (mentioned by Stanley and Williamson 2001: 425; see Poston 2009). But it is not clear that it succeeds.

mean that knowing a way to ϕ is, to take up Hornsby's phrase, knowing a particular instance of ϕ without knowing how to ϕ generically.

This may seem to be bad news for the view, that I am here trying to put forward, which aims at conjoining practicalism about literary knowledge and intellectualism. But it is not. The fact that intellectualism about practical knowledge does not give us a full *reduction* of this knowledge to pieces of propositional knowledge, but that practical modes presentation can serve at best to provide *indirect descriptions* of pieces of practical knowledge, can be used as an argument for intellectualism about practical literary knowledge. How?

When one reads a good, meaningful, and crafted literary work, and interprets it correctly, one does not learn something which can be expressed propositionally, in the form of facts, particular or general. For instance one does not learn, when reading *La recherche du temps perdu*, or *Lord Jim*, facts or laws about human psychology or about human nature. Rather, what one learns is a form of practical knowledge. Which? Not the skills or abilities which are described in the work. For instance one does not learn how to behave within a certain kind of society when one reads *La recherche*, or how to navigate in the Indian Ocean. The novels do not impart *directly* such knowledge. One learns, rather, an indirect description of *what it is like* to be a character of a certain type, within a certain social and historical setting. Contrary to what is sometimes said, one does not learn a direct *what it is like* by reading and understanding a literary work of art. Thus when one reads Kafka's *Metamorphosis* one does not learn what it is like to be, or to become a beetle. When one reads Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, or Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* one does not learn what it is like to be arrested and sent to a concentration camp or to the Gulag, but one learns what *it would be like*. One learns about a possible kind of life, and how to recognize this possible kind of life. One does do acquire a particular skill in the way one could, for instance, learn how to prune the roses or ride a bike. One learns a more complex skill, that is to say how to recognize a certain kind of situation or character. Thus when I read Balzac's *Les illusions perdues*, I do not learn a set of facts about starting a literary career in the French world of journalism and salons of the first decades of the nineteenth century, but I learn how to recognize a certain kind of character and of behaviours. This is indeed a skill, which an experienced reader is able to master, but the literary mode of imparting that skill is not direct, as it could be when, learning how to fish trout from a wizened and experienced fisherman, he could show me how to do it by doing the gesture and say to me: "That's how to do it". Some gestures are indeed abbreviations for more complex things that are hard to spell out in words, as when one presents one's fist angrily against someone's face and says: "How do you like that?" This may be a "practical mode of presentation" or "way" of performing an insult, which could be spelled out in so many words.

Literary fictions and narratives are ways of showing certain features of reality without necessarily describing these as parts of reality. What a narrative shows is an aspect of reality, which the author shows *through a practical mode of presentation*:

This is how hate (jealousy, sloth) operates

This is what it is like (to live this kind of life)

This is how it feels.

If one accepts this characterization of literary knowledge as imparting to us various modes of presentation that are propositional, but that describe, indirectly, pieces of practical knowledge, there is no incompatibility between practicalism and propositionalism. We can take the claims (i)-(iii) at the end of section 3 above as a consistent triad.

Literary works never give us a direct practical knowledge, in the way a fencing master can teach you how to fence, a music teacher how to play an instrument, or a businessman how to make a deal.¹⁷ But they can impart this kind of knowledge indirectly, by giving you guidelines. If we sort out kinds of knowledge, we can distinguish at least direct knowledge—or forms of knowledge from acquaintance—of *qualitative* experiences, or *personal knowledge*—what one learns from one's own case through various experiences acquired over time, from what one learns from *testimony*, through the transmission of first-hand knowledge by second-hand knowledge. Literary knowledge is never of the first two kinds, always of the third kind. It is a form of testimonial knowledge. Testimonial knowledge is most of the time propositional, except in those rare cases where one can acquire a way of ϕ -ing by ostension. But literary knowledge is never knowledge by acquaintance nor knowledge by ostension. It is a form of deferential knowledge.¹⁸ By representing reality through a certain aspect, literary narratives *defer* to the reader the knowledge by ostension (“This is the way to be jealous, angry, slothful, ignominious, etc.”). But they do not impart it directly. So they do not convey *directly* the know-how. One can transmit a piece of knowing-how to someone who does not have it through a practical mode of presentation: this is how to ϕ . Taken together, the practical modes of presentation displayed by literary narratives do not give us any genuine know-how (one does not know how to navigate in the Southern seas by reading Conrad, one does not learn how to be slothful by reading *Oblomov*, how to become a prostitute by reading *Moll Flanders*, how to poison by reading Dickens' “Hunted Down”, how to become virtuous through reading *The Mill on the Floss*. But one learns *a way* of sailing, *a way* of being slothful, *a way* of being virtuous. We have seen that Stanley's and Williamson's intellectualism fails if it hopes to provide a full reduction of knowing-how to knowing-that through practical modes of presentation, because it can only give us indirect descriptions of pieces of practical knowledge. But it might well be correct for the kinds of descriptions of practical knowledge that we get from literary works

5. A Practicalist Version of Ethopeia

It remains to be seen how the practicalist version of literary cognitivism that I propose is compatible with the view that literature can give us some general knowledge. According to my hypothesis, literary knowledge consists in practical modes of presentations or ways in Stanley's and Williamson's sense, which are both practical and expressible as propositions. But ways, on their view, are singular modes of presentation, and the pieces of practical knowledge that they consist in are not general. This was one of the main difficulties of their view: one can know various *particular* ways of ϕ -ing (say typing such or such a word on a

¹⁷ Trump and Schwartz (1987) is supposed to tell you “the art of the deal”.

¹⁸ I am here referring to Recanati's important work on deference, elaborated in the context of his theory of reference. See e.g. his Recanati 2000.

keyboard, playing such or such a tune on an instrument, riding a bike in a given circumstance, etc.) without knowing how to ϕ , how to perform the *general* action of ϕ -ing (typing, playing a tune on an instrument, riding a bike). The practicalist version of this view suggested in the previous paragraph encounters the same difficulty. Novels, short stories, literary works of fiction and narratives of all kinds always give us descriptions that are singular, not the general case. Thus if we take up the example of stories about poisoners, Dickens' "Hunted Down", Oscar Wilde's *Pen, Pencil and Poison, A Study in Green*, both describe the figure of the poisoner Thomas Griffith Wainwright, who was a real life character. François Mauriac's, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, and many of Agatha Christie's characters also describe poisoners and their modes of operation. Do they tell us something about poisoning, its motives and practice? Certainly. Can they provide a know-how of poisoning? Certainly not, since they are descriptions of this practice in particular cases. So how could they provide the reader with some general knowledge of *how one poisons*? If we want to take seriously Joshua Landy's idea (already quotes above) that a number of fictions "rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation"—give us a know-how, and that "rather than offering us a new set of beliefs, what they equip us with are skills"; if we accept his view that "rather than teaching, what they do is train", that such texts "are not informative, that is, but formative", we need to reformulate this view as a form of intellectualist practicalism. But in order to impart to us the kind of knowledge that can be formative, the knowledge imparted has to be in some sense *general* and not particular.

The knowledge of practical modes of presentation involves both singular demonstrative propositions and general propositions about laws and regularities. What kind of laws? Laws of the human mind, truths about human life, its forms, in particular its ethical forms. The modes of presentation have to involve such regularities. Here are some examples:

This is how a modern day Theresa looks (Eliot, *Middlemarch*)

Fear looks *like this* (Maupassant, *The Horla*)

Here is a way of being slothful (Goncharov, *Oblomov*)

Here is a way of being jealous (Proust, *Albertine*)

This is *the way* love looks like (Lawrence, *Women in Love*)

Here is a way of being stupid (Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*).

In giving these examples I do not mean to imply that each novel or narrative presents only *one* way of instantiating a general and unique law. Indeed things are much more complicated. Oblomov, for example, illustrates one kind of disposition or character, and one type of vice, sloth. But, as in real life, psychological dispositions do not come one by one. They come through patterns of other dispositions, and they are manifested in many ways. They are, in Ryle's phrase, *many track*.

Practical modes of presentations allow us to recognise cases of general truths: about types of individuals and human dispositions (novels), about characters (comedy, satire, tragedy). The literary tradition of describing characters, the tradition of *ethopeia* represented by classical moralists and satirists (Theophrastus, Juvenal, or Swift) and by novelists (Fielding, Austen, Eliot, or

James), does just that.¹⁹ The practical modes of presentations of characters in this tradition are associated to general knowledge of a psychological, sociological or historical kind, but also of a moral kind. They constitute both a form of what we might call a literary know how and of literary knowledge of laws of human psychology. Such laws, however, are never meant to be discovered like scientific laws. They are always presented, or displayed, shown within the fictions on particular cases. On this view, *ethopeia* involves:

- (i) A theme (in Lamarque and Olsen's sense), a type or character, and a law (*ceteris paribus*) about human psychology.²⁰
- (ii) A particular example of character (say *Oblomov*).
- (iii) A series of practical modes of presentation enabling us to recognize the type under that mode (these are the *exempla* of the classical moralists).

All of these constitute a set of truths, which are the objects of our propositional knowledge, although these truths are presented as singular practical modes of presentations.

6. Conclusion

A lot more should be said in order to defend fully this intellectualist version of practicalism about literary knowledge, and I have here only suggested it in outline. Several objections to this view come to mind.

First, I have said nothing about the way a reader can *interpret* the set of truths that are supposed, on this view, to be imparted by pieces of literary practical knowledge. What is shown by narration is an aspect, under a certain practical mode of presentation (which can be hugely complex: what happens in the narrative). But the communicated *know-how* is never direct. For it is deferred to the reader, who has to *interpret* it. This interpretation has to involve a lot of background knowledge, and much of this knowledge has to be the object of a form of recognition, rather than of direct cognition.²¹

Second, one might object that the form of literary cognitivism proposed here runs the risk of falling back into the trappings of propositionalism, since it insists on the fact that the literary modes of presentations are associated with the learning of general laws, which are expressible in propositions. So do not we return to a form of didacticism about literature? The same objection would insist on the idea that this intellectualist version of practicalism leaves out the form and the style inherent in literary works. And so it seems to be open to the classical objections to propositionalism presented above. The answer is that it does not. Practical literary knowledge is the acquisition of abilities to recognize characters, but these abilities are not imparted to us directly. They are represented in fiction.

A fourth objection is that the view seems to be too narrowly tied to a certain literary genre (*ethopeia* and its associated forms such as comedies, satires and novels) at the expense of others (say poetry, diaries, and contemporary nov-

¹⁹ Carnevali 2010, Pavel 2013.

²⁰ On laws that one can get from literary fictions, see Elster 2010, especially his comments on Proust on self-deception.

²¹ On that I agree with Gibson 2009. But I disagree with his view that the kind of understanding offered by literature is not cognitive or conceptual but only "dramatic". I agree that it is "dramatic", but deny that it is *only* such.

els). The answer is that it is not. *Ethopeia* is only the purest form of literary cognitivism. There are many others, and although they do not necessarily take this form, they may refine it. The hypothesis is that the three elements (i)-(iii) given above are always present, although not in their standard form.²²

Fifth, one might object that I have not spelled out what I called above the aesthetic value condition of literary cognitivism: the cognitive value of literary work is essential to the aesthetic value of these works. How does one avoid what George Eliot calls “a patent deodorized and non resonant language” that “does not express life”? The answer here is to admit the shortcoming. I have not provided any explanation of the relationship between cognitive and aesthetic value. It must clearly have to do with not only the modes of presentation of the kinds of knowledge, but with the style and form in which those modes are presented. But it was not the aim of this article to articulate a full defense of practicalist literary cognitivism. My aim has been mostly to state the view and to argue that it is not inconsistent. In spite of these difficulties, I hope to have presented here the outline of an answer to the sceptic about literary cognitivism.²³

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²² Pavel 2013 suggests that although this tradition is less clearly present in contemporary literature, where characters are less delineated and often disappear (or become, in Musil's phrase, *men without qualities*), it is still present nevertheless.

²³ I have read various versions of this article in conferences and seminars in Fortaleza, Madrid, Edinburgh, Paris in 2013 and 2014 and thank the organisers and audiences at these conferences, especially André Leclerc, Jesus Vega Encabo, Duncan Prichard, Claudine Tiercelin, Annick Louis, Michael Lynch, Veli Mitova, Timothy Williamson, Barbara Carnevali and Gregory Currie for their remarks. Especial thanks the participants in my 2013-14 seminar on literature and knowledge at EHESS. And I thank Massimo Dell'Utri for his insistence that I should write it up as an article for this journal.

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