

LITERATURE AND KNOWLEDGE. A NEW VERSION OF AN OLD STORY¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper tries to discuss some of the theories concerning the relation between literature and knowledge. On the one hand, most of the time, philosophers do not believe in the force of literature to generate knowledge. On the other, litterateurs are more optimistic, considering that there is a specific kind of knowledge that literature (sometimes they emphasize: only literature) is able to deliver. These are the two antagonistic theories I have to arbitrate in this paper. In my opinion, literature is an ally of science and philosophy and it can provide a large amount of knowledge about some aspects of reality that cannot be put into concepts. Some examples like dreams and love regarded both by philosophers and writers try to demonstrate that sometimes only literature can conquer some territories of the human mind and sensibility. At the end, the paper asserts, along with Peter Swirski, that interdisciplinarity is a compulsory condition if we want to take advantage from the whole knowledge that sciences, as well as arts, among which literature is to be mentioned, can offer us. The conclusion is borrowed from Milan Kundera's *Art of the Novel: Knowledge is the literature's only morality*.

KEYWORDS: literature, knowledge, interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

It is a common place of the studies concerning the specific relation between literature and philosophy or, more precisely, between the 'intentions' of literature and the claim of having access to knowledge that literature is, perhaps, the most subjective of arts. In literature, there is no place for 'us,' but only for individual perspectives upon a certain reality, fact, phenomenon, feeling, sensation and so on. As long as painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre do use concrete materials, methods, techniques that can be linked to the contingent, that can be measured somehow, literature is *par excellence* the art that depends on the receiver's

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aptitude in order to construct its message. That is why, despite the efforts of formalists, structuralism's adepts and theoreticians, there is (there cannot be) no 'science of literature.' The information literature generates is not an objective one, as the one given by scientific attempts. One can hardly organize scientifically his speech about literature, but he can describe its concepts, its methods, its ways of building up a specific message. But the nature of this message is not available to a scholarly approach. Literature is not only a text that functions according to some laws which are easy to study, it is not only that "lazy machine that expects its reader to do a part of its job," as Umberto Eco asserted.² The major problem of the critics is how to interpret a certain text, so that they do not falsify its message. But this is not something you can achieve only by being scrupulous and very attentive with your instruments and methods. Literature is not an object to be studied according to a certain methodology; actually, there is no such magic methodology to guarantee the success of a correct interpretation of a literary text's meaning. Why? Because literature's message is not a unique one; it becomes concrete during interpretation and according to the reader's way of interpreting it.³ So, the reader becomes a part of the text itself, as many theoreticians proved. One of the most common mistakes a critic may do is to overinterpret the text, looking for the message he would like to find there. Umberto Eco humorously explains this kind of falsifying the text's message:

It is indisputable that human beings think (also) in terms of identity and similarity. In everyday life, however, it is a fact that we generally know how to distinguish between relevant, significant similarities on the one hand and fortuitous, illusory similarities on the other. We may see someone in the distance whose features remind us of person A, whom we know, mistake him for A, and then realize that in fact it is B, a stranger: after which, usually, we abandon our hypothesis as to the person's identity and give no further credence to the similarity, which we record as fortuitous. We do this because each of us has introjected into him or her an indisputable fact, namely, that from a certain point of view everything bears relationships of *analogy*, *contiguity* and *similarity* to everything else. One may push this to its limits and state that there is a relationship between the adverb 'while' and the noun 'crocodile' because – at least – they both appeared in the sentence that I have just uttered. But the difference between the sane interpretation and paranoiac interpretation lies in

² Umberto Eco, *Șase plimbări prin pădurea narativă*, trans. Ștefania Mincu (Constanța: Pontica, 1997), 7.

³ For further discussion about this topic, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

recognizing that this relationship is minimal, and not, on the contrary, deducing from this minimal relationship the maximum possible. The paranoiac is not the person who notices that 'while' and 'crocodile' curiously appear in the same context: the paranoiac is the person who begins to wonder about the mysterious motives that induced me to bring these two particular words together. The paranoiac sees beneath my example a secret, to which I allude.⁴

Literary works are often the victims of such 'paranoiac' misreading. So, why did I pick up this example from Umberto Eco's book? Because it describes the way sometimes critics act in order to extort from a text the message they need. And let me put it in these words: this may be the easier way to make literature deliver us real knowledge. The price to be paid is too expensive: it means falsifying the premises the text offers us.

2. Literature, between knowledge and ambiguity

So, here I am on the point of agreeing to the hypothesis I will try, during this study, to disavow: literature does not offer its reader a specific knowledge, if we understand knowledge according to the academic companions to epistemology. Yet, this is not what I am to accept as a good starting point in this paper. I will try to find answers to one question that is, in one way or another, questioned by all the scholars that have dealt with this subject: does literature offer any kind of knowledge at all and, if it does, what kind of knowledge does it provide? The philosophers are inclined to give a categorical negative answer. And most of them make an ally from Plato himself. In a book suggestively entitled *Does Literature Think?*, Stathis Gourgouris traced the history of this conflict between literature and knowledge:

The idea that literature might harbor its own mode of knowledge is ancient, at least as old as the so-called quarrel between poetry and philosophy and Plato's notorious expulsion of the poets from the city in the Republic. It is fair to say that since Plato's famous decision there has been an implicit but consistent association of the poetic act with a peculiar, mysterious, and even dangerous sort of knowledge.⁵

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and over interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48.

⁵ Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003), 2; cf. Michael Wood, *Literature and the taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

Let me underline the adjective *dangerous* in this context. On the one hand, most of the time, philosophers do not believe in the force of literature to offer knowledge. On the other, litterateurs are more optimistic, considering that there is a specific kind of knowledge that literature (sometimes they emphasize: only literature) is able to deliver. These are the two antagonistic theories I have to arbitrate in this paper. Yet, I am a litterateur, so I will try to prove that literature is not a discourse that is only good for enjoying, for leisure use.

In a brief article from a *Companion to Epistemology*, Paisley Livingston sums up the main directions of the theories concerning the relation between literature and knowledge:

Three major stances may be identified: (1) condemnations of literature as a source of irrationality for author and audience alike (e.g. Platonic attacks on poetic *mimesis*); (2) defences of literary autonomy based on the idea that knowledge is neither hindered nor advanced by literature because the two move on separate tracks (...); and (3) various contentions that literary works do in fact contribute to knowledge. A weak version of the latter position holds that some literary works can be used to provide valuable illustrations of knowledge that has been already been formulated outside literature (...). Another sort of claim is that theoretically oriented readings of literary works can contribute to the formation of new hypotheses in the human sciences, hypotheses that may then be empirically evaluated through non-literary means. (...) A stronger thesis is that some literary works convey significant and even systematic knowledge discovered by their authors, an example being Girard's contention that a number of novelists have expressed genuine insights into the imitative nature of desire.⁶

What is to be noticed is that, according to this point of view, the most optimistic hypothesis is that literature can only contribute somehow, of course, weakly, to the holy domain of knowledge. It is only an adjuvant, not an essential one, but it is clearly that there is a lot of knowledge without literature. Knowledge does not depend on literature; it only accepts it as a humble servant, one of the most humble of all.

⁶ Paisley Livingston, "Literature and Knowledge," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, Second Edition, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, and Matthias Steup (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 497 (References omitted.) For Girard's contention see his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

3. Knowledge through imagination

Actually, it is exactly the point of view I am going to argue against. Of course, I do not pretend that literature and cognition are linked by a strong relation, but I will try to argue that somehow, in its unique way, literature contributes to the large field of knowledge. Let me start from a risky supposition: *knowledge is not the acquisition obtained only through a scientific approach*. Actually, every experience about the world we live in is a piece of knowledge. And this little drop of knowledge is obtained usually by direct experience; but humans and not gods or omniscient narrators as we are, our possibility to experience everything is almost zero. A man does not know only what he directly experiences. He can achieve knowledge through other's stories about their experiences. In this way, a reading experience becomes a modeling one. This is the great force of literature that other arts and other types of discourse do not share: it is very convincing. If it is real good literature (I'm tempted to say: if it is literature at all), it makes the reader believe it by all means. Of course, some may say that literature only seduces the reader, but does not convince him. Yet, I dare say it is the same thing. While philosophy and the social sciences and especially exact sciences succeed in persuading their receivers by the force of arguments, of solid proofs, literature touches a similar goal by the means of fiction. It only appeals to the force of imagination, because human being is condemned to his imagination. Actually, we discover many more things about the world out of curiosity, due to our imagination than by means of scientific experiments. Not all of us are scientists, yet we know some things about physics, chemistry, biology and so on. There is a strong scientific imaginary that leads us to some amount of knowledge, enough to help us make do in the real world. Furthermore, science cannot afford to neglect fantasy, imagination: lots of our present certitudes were bare fantastic hypotheses yesterday. It was sufficient that a scholar should dare to use his imagination and force the limits of his time's knowledge.

Many scholars identify literature with fantasy and imagination. Jerry R. Hobbs defines narrative as *mutual imagination*:

A narrative describes a planning mechanism planning its way toward a goal. We are planning mechanisms, continually planning our way toward goals. Thus, narrative presents us with situations and events precisely as we would experience them when we are most engaged with the world. Much of what is most powerful in literature is a conjunction of the two categories—the fictional narrative. It is an author's invitation to the readers to a mutual imagining, to delight and instruct, by the creation of a possible world and possible characters striving

toward goals, told in a way that directly reflects our own experience as we plan our way toward our goals in a world that denies us so much of what we desire.⁷

So, fiction confronts us with the world of possibility. The scientist is also confronted with this large possibility gamut. Imagination is the main source of searching, so it is a compulsory condition for achieving knowledge. The difference is that, while, the scientist tries to organize his investigation in a systematic manner, the writer stops his action at searching. For a scientist, the answers are more important than questions, for a writer, the questions are more precious than any answers. The scientist hunts the truth, the writer's aim is to formulate little and subjective truths, related to life in its real development. The scientist looks at the generalities and tries to extract the general values out of the particular experiences; he tries to formulate deductive rules. The writer disobeys these rules and is working with particular facts. These differences are not proofs that science and literature are to be placed on irreconcilable positions. They fight in the same part, in order to conquer knowledge.

4. Some aspects of reality that can't be put into concepts

There are some aspects of our existence that cannot be put into concepts. Reality is not a collection of facts, phenomena, feelings that can be explained to their ultimate secret. The nature of the human being is not something that can be entirely described in the psychiatrist and philosophical treatises. A character from a short story written by Ștefan Bănuțescu, one of the greatest Romanian contemporary writers, asserted: "Well, there exist things that exist and things that do not exist". What he meant was that our exaction that we can cover with our fragmented cognitive effort the whole reality is a sign of abusive vanity. There are many areas of reality that human knowledge cannot explain scientifically; yet, it can approximate them by means of figuring scenarios about them. So, fantasy, imagination are essential instruments for us to assume and even to understand the reality. Not to know it, but to understand it. That is why, during history, literature not once came first to sciences. What I mean is that some writers dared to conquer some unknown territories that were almost blank spaces for scientists. Let me pick only one example, out of a large area of possibilities. Let's take the case of dreaming. For the scholars in Antiquity and Middle Ages, it was a strange domain, which was to be approached to with infinite prudence. Of course, Plato, Aristotle,

⁷ Jerry R. Hobbs, *Literature and Cognition* (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, Leland Stanford Junior University, 1990), 39-40.

Artemidoros, Tertullian, Macrobius and so many others tried to explain this phenomenon according to their cultural code and according to their philosophy. Their and their time's conception. Yet, there was no scientific truth about dreams, even if there was a so called science named *oneirocritics*. On the other hand, writers used to abide by describing the dreams. They felt there was something difficult, if not impossible to control by means of cognitive objective efforts. Heliodor, Cicero (in his well known *The Dream of Scipio*, a fragment from *De Republica*⁸) and Dimitrie Cantemir in his baroque novel *The Hieroglyphic History* (written in Romanian language in 1705), to choose the most relevant examples, infer that dreams are not experiences one can explain, and they try to suggest that this unconscious activity is the mirror of the dreamer's character. At least, this is Cantemir's theory. And it is convincing because it has an advantage over the scientific attempts to explain dreaming: it is presented in a subjective manner and does not claim that it provides the strong truth. Yet, it succeeds in convincing due to its literary arguments. The reader confronts this fiction with his own experiences and beliefs and, if he finds them plausible, he would believe them. His subjectivity recognizes itself in the writer's subjectivity and the result is objectivity, which I risk to define as subjectivity accepted as truth by the majority.

At the beginning of the XXth century, Freud himself based his theory of dreams' interpretation on examples picked up from literature. A few years after him, the Surrealists stipulated that reality is a stratified field, and that dreaming may be a way of knowing it. André Breton, in his first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, showed no doubt that "dreams generally contribute little to furthering our understanding."⁹ And he even invented a method of digging into the unconscious territory of human mind, defining Surrealism in this way:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express-verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner-the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.¹⁰

⁸ For further reading, see William V. Harris, *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 27.

⁹ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 11.

¹⁰ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 26.

The essence of this method is the totally lack of reason control. Immediately, he gives a philosophical definition of Surrealism, which links it to the logic of dreaming:

Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.¹¹

So, in the Surrealists' opinion, literature is a written dream, with no attention paid to the reason control. No science would dare to fix this goal, not even psychology itself. What Breton suggests is that the human being has a big chance to discover itself due to this kind of literary experiment. Why? Because, as any authentic literary attempt, it provokes emotional effects. And it is not an unrealistic challenge if we assert that many of the psychology's theories became possible due to such 'thought experiments' realized in literature. Fiction, poetry most of all, has this exigent possibility of forcing the imagination to get to unknown territories of mind and sensibility. What science can do that? And maybe it is not due to hazard the fact that, when the Modern novel began to use the stream of consciousness (I refer to Proust, as a forerunner, and to James Joyce, Virginia Woolf), the psychiatry and the psychoanalysis gained new territories itself.

It is not only scientific achievements that count. There is a so-called spirit of the time that influences our decisions and, most of all, our way of seeing and understanding reality; our *Weltanschauung*. Well, this spirit of the time is composed by philosophical, historical, scientific and literary efforts. Sometimes, we understand the world through the eyes of our favorite characters. Literature has the power to invent new myths that explain the world. We are always on the brink of forgetting that Homer's epopees are literature (as we understand it nowadays, primarily as fiction); yet, they modeled not only the Antique world, but also the medieval and Modern world. The whole European culture is indebted to this literary works. And they still model our world, in a bigger amount than we could imagine. Achilles, Ulysses, Oedipus, Aeneas, Orlando, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, Madam Bovary and so many others were not real personas, but they seem to us more alive than our neighbors. Characters like these ones gave birth to behavioral paradigms, they care a lot of sense, and they define

¹¹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 26.

some of the human possible attitude towards reality and life. Even if Don Quixote is a piece of fiction, an 'être de papier,' as Roland Barthes named characters, he is the perfect example of the power of literature on human beings. He is the symbol of the dreamer, of the 'lunatic' that is stubborn enough not to accept that some values as honor, courage, naivety, kindness are on the point of perishing. In his way, he saves the world of chivalry and he also saves our world. Well, a psychiatrically treatise would name him a lunatic, a madman. This is science. But Don Quixote is an idealist, a person (not a *persona*), a real man who risks his life in order to defense some strong moral values. Emma Bovary is the most concluding example of the man's failure to overtake his humble condition. Quixotism, bovarysm are nowadays real concepts (Jules De Gaultier published a well-known book entitled *The Bovaryism*;¹² Miguel de Unamuno, in *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*,¹³ analyzed this paradigm consecrated by Cervantes' character). There's always a price to be paid when we try to respect our human values, and we learn this not from books of science, but from literature. Is this knowledge? It is, I would say, one of the most precious knowledge. I refer to that kind of knowledge that can't be put into concepts; or, when it happens so, concepts themselves are obliged to borrow their names from literature.

There is another example I wish to discuss. There is a word that we abusively use in any occurrence; sometimes we don't even notice it, because the stereotype is too annoying. How can we talk about love without taking literary characters as witnesses, actually as models? Plato, Marsilio Ficino, Kierkegaard, Denis de Rougemont, Ortega y Gasset and other philosophers failed to explain this feeling, the most important of all, only looking at it, analyzing it as in a laboratory. They were obliged to use mythological examples. But myths are bare stories, so they are pure literature. When someone dares talk systematically about love, he is coerced to revisit the good old literary myths, such as Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Anna Karenina and many, many others. I like very much a theory of a Romanian essayist, Alexandru Paleologu. In one of his books, entitled *Bunul-simț ca paradox* (*The Common sense as a paradox*), he asserted that love is not a natural feeling: it is a cultural one. We learn love from literature, the trainer of our sensibility. This is how he interprets the potion drunk by Tristan and his fairy Isolde: it is a sign of an artificial induction of the feeling. So, for the great and real

¹² Jules De Gaultier, *The Bovaryism*, trans. Gerald M. Spring (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970).

¹³ Migue del Unamuno, *Our Lord Don Quixote: The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho, With Related Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

love, which can move the stars, as Dante believed, the real stimulus is the intellect. To cut it briefly, love is an intellectual feeling.¹⁴ Can literature provide us all that? Of course it can, if we believe in its salvation. Well, is this knowledge, I may ask again? My answer is one more time positive.

5. How rational is reason, after all?

If we come back to the serious philosophical books about our task, we will find skepticism combined with a generous hesitation. For example, Michael Wood accepts that literature can deliver not knowledge in its plenty meaning, but 'a taste of knowledge':

If the taste of words offers knowledge, if literature gives us a taste of knowledge this can only be a taste, a sample, rather than an elaborate or plentiful meal. We are going to have to go elsewhere for the continuous main course.¹⁵

This doesn't mean that the author refuses literature's chance to contribute to the achievement of knowledge. Actually, this is a book written by one who, clearly, loves literature. But he does not dare believe in the *reading literature's* effect. He makes only half a step and admits that

literature characteristically offers something harder – in the sense of the 'hard' sciences – than understanding and something softer than what we often imagine knowledge to be.¹⁶

Therefore, the whole problem depends on *how we imagine knowledge to be*. The epistemologist created a real myth around the concept of knowledge. Knowledge is intangible for the outsiders and writers were always considered such profanes. They do not try to explain reality; they only describe it, in its most characteristically aspects. This is why literature doesn't keep in touch with reason; it stimulates, according to this point of view, the affects. Paisley Livingston summarizes optimally this thesis, but only after he has just accused the opportunist idea that reason characterizes our history:

Rationality is the 'crystal palace' mocked by Dostoevsky's underground man; real people live in Babel. We can no longer believe in the grand old thesis that human history as a whole is animated by Reason; nor do we have any good

¹⁴ Alexandru Paleologu, *Bunul-simț ca paradox* (București: Vitruviu, 1997), 89-91.

¹⁵ Wood, *Literature and the taste of Knowledge*, 10.

¹⁶ Wood, *Literature and the taste of Knowledge*, 54.

reason to think that the preferences of even the most enlightened and lucid modern individuals correspond to the models of rationality invented by neo-classical economics, such as the subjective expected utility model and the theory of rational expectations. It would seem to follow that the concept of rationality does not embrace much of either collective or individual reality, and should therefore be abandoned. (...) Rationality may seem a particularly inappropriate concept to bring into a discussion of literature: the prevailing tendency today is to associate literature with madness, dreams, and passion, not with reason. The *homo sapiens* of the sciences, then, is contrasted to the *homo demens* of literature, particularly in the age of romanticism.¹⁷

Well, this hypothesis is wrong, and the philosopher does not hesitate to notice this. First of all, if reality is not submitted to reason, why should literature be? Actually, Livingston defends two ideas in his work: that

it is highly unreasonable to deny that at least a significant subset of literary phenomena are purposeful activities comprehensible in terms of the rationality heuristic (...) and that it follows that assumptions about rationality can play a role in at least some forms of literary enquiry”

and that

assumptions about agency and rationality are in fact essential to all literary phenomena and hence to all adequate literary enquiries.¹⁸

Livingstone succeeds in doing that not only by analyzing some literary works (written by Dreiser, Zola, Stanislaw Lem), but also questioning some critical approaches to literature. Briefly, for Livingstone, literature is a subjective discourse which is not refused by the Idea; I mean it has widely access to reason. This is also the conclusion of Peter Swirski, in his book *Of Literature and Knowledge*: yes, he accepts, literature can generate knowledge in the same way philosophy and sciences do, on the condition of generating ‘thought experiments.’¹⁹ Swirski considers that literature, as any other art and as any science, is not to be correctly interpreted and understood properly without an interdisciplinary effort. In a way, his conclusion is that scholars are supposed to

¹⁷ Paisley Livingston, *Literature and Rationality. Ideas of agency in theory and fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁸ Livingston, *Literature and Rationality*, 5.

¹⁹ Peter Swirski, *Of Literature and Knowledge. Explorations in Narrative Thought experiments, evolution, and Game Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

make a considerable effort in order to judge a literary work in a wider context of a cultural background:

First, the cognitive orientation in literary studies does not nullify appreciating stories as aesthetic artifacts. Interactions with literature owe much to symbolic understanding, emotional epiphany, or sheer entertainment value. The axiological goals of traditional scholarship must, in other words, be pursued with proper vigor, especially amid the inundation of mass-market brain candy. The task is Herculean since, as a socio-cultural institution, literary studies is losing its capacity to function under the astronomical amount of print that perniciously clogs the system. More books, after all, have seen the light of day since *The Catcher in the Rye* than in all previous history combined.²⁰

It may be difficult to do this effort, as, beginning with Modernism, knowledge became more and more specialized, that is more and more fragmented: We lack the vision of the whole range of human sciences; the paradigm of the *uomo universale* is not plausible nowadays. Even so, interdisciplinarity (or even ‘transdisciplinarity,’ to use a concept of Basarab Nicolescu) is a compulsory condition if we want to take advantage from the whole knowledge sources that sciences, as well as arts, among which literature is to be mentioned, can offer us. Literature knows a lot of thing; it depends on us to accumulate this kind of knowledge. Swirski’s last conclusion is a very simple, but exigent one:

literature, philosophy, and science are inseparable manifestations of the same human instinct to interrogate the world and help negotiate the experience of living in it.²¹

One of the greatest mistakes we make is that we are not epistemologically correct to some works of literature. We receive their message according to our limited knowledge, and afterwards we accuse them that they do not speak our language, as long as we have forgotten the real language of culture: the interdisciplinary one.

In the end, I only want to stipulate that literature is not a discourse with no other goal than entertainment. Sometimes, literature does not relax the reader, it even puts him in front of his own greatest fears, it stirs up problems of consciousness and so on. It provokes, finally, real knowledge. It depends on everyone to be able to manage this knowledge.

²⁰ Swirski, *Of Literature and Knowledge*, 155.

²¹ Swirski, *Of Literature and Knowledge*, 157.

6. “Knowledge is the literature’s only morality”

In the end, to state my conclusion, I will turn to one of the most successful contemporary writers for help. After I have read many books on this topic (literature and knowledge), I will use now my favorite one: Milan Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel*. For the Czech writer, the novel is pure knowledge. As I do not want to bust the harmony of his theory, I will quote him *in extenso*:

Indeed, for me, the founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes but also Cervantes. Perhaps it is Cervantes whom the two phenomenologists neglected to take into consideration in their judgment of the Modern Era. By that I mean: If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man’s being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being. Indeed, all the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time*—considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy— had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel (four centuries of European reincarnation of the novel). (...) The novel has accompanied man uninterruptedly and faithfully since the beginning of the Modern Era. It was then that the ‘passion to know,’ which Husserl considered the essence of European spirituality, seized the novel and led it to scrutinize man’s concrete life and protect it against ‘the forgetting of being;’ to hold ‘the world of life’ under a permanent light. That is the sense in which I understand and share Hermann Broch’s insistence in repeating: The sole *raison d’être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality.²²

So, Descartes and Cervantes are not contenders, but allies. When philosophy becomes narcissistic and proves to be preoccupied by itself, forgetting about the real world, literature is the one that keeps this duty alive. It is about team working, not about rivalry.

My abrupt conclusion is not something else than a bare paraphrase of Kundera’s theory: *Knowledge is the literature’s only morality*.

²² Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 5-6.