

## BETWEEN TRUTH AND TRIVIALITY

John Gibson

A viable theory of literary humanism must do justice to the idea that literature offers cognitive rewards to the careful reader. There are, however, powerful arguments to the effect that literature is at best only capable of offering idle visions of a world already well known. In this essay I argue that there is a form of cognitive awareness left unmentioned in the traditional vocabulary of knowledge acquisition, a form of awareness literature is particularly capable of offering. Thus even if it is the case that literature has nothing interesting to give us in the way of knowledge, the literary humanist can consistently maintain that literary experience is thoroughly cognitive.

### I. INTRODUCTION

WHAT we might term the ‘humanist intuition’—the conviction, however imprecise and pre-theoretical, that literature can illuminate reality—has been with us in one guise or another since Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, nearly as long as the Western literary tradition itself. Although only rudimentarily developed, we find there the basic idea that literature represents generalized features of life, that it deals with, to put it simply, *how we humans are*.<sup>1</sup> The intuition will probably strike many of us as obvious, perhaps even bordering on a platitude. I would venture that to most of us nothing would seem particularly controversial in the claim that literature is, or at least often aspires to be, a mouthpiece of our shared social and cultural reality: what we look to when we want to find a direct expression of its ‘living spirit’, as Schiller might say. And most of us, I will venture further, would be genuinely taken aback to find that most contemporary theories of literature either leave no room for humanism or spend a good deal of time trying to show it to be an incoherent and indeed anti-literary position.

Essential to the humanist intuition is the idea that literature, though speaking about fictions, still has much to say of cognitive consequence about reality. Why this is essential should be obvious: if literature is mute about the nature of extra-textual reality, there is little reason to turn to literature for worldly

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind the famous passage from the *Poetics* (running from 1451a38 to 1451b12) in which Aristotle claims that since *poiesis* deals with the universal (*katholou*) rather than the particular, it is more like philosophy than history. He ends the argument by explaining that this universal concerns ‘the sorts of things people may say or do necessarily or for the most part’, ‘how we humans are’ in this sense.

enlightenment. Yet this is precisely what is so difficult to support, this idea that literature attempts to add to our understanding of reality. As we will see, the reason so many philosophers are willing to embrace an anti-cognitivist theory of literature is because it takes very little argumentation to show that two terms traditionally associated with cognitive value have no interesting literary application: truth and knowledge. But what I want to show is that we can accept this and still be good humanists, that our forfeiture of the vocabulary of truth and knowledge does not imply that literature is cognitively trivial. What I want to argue, in other words, is that we can see literature as offering a different sort of intellectual reward, one which while not consisting in the deliverance of worldly truths and knowledge nevertheless allows us to see that literature offers a crucial and manifestly cognitive engagement with reality.

## II. THE SCEPTIC'S CHALLENGE

Before beginning, I should say a few more words about the problem of the cognitive value of literature. The problem, simply put, concerns whether literature can reveal to us something about the nature of our world: in other words, can we learn about reality from works of fiction? It is essential that we notice that this is different from the question of whether we can locate anything real in works of fiction, of whether we can see *our* world when we look between the covers of a novel. Although this question might call for a theory, I will not argue for one here. It will suffice for our discussion to assume something most of us in any case find quite unproblematic, namely that we can identify 'real' features of human experience and circumstance in the fabric of fictional narratives. This is not much to grant, of course, for while fictional characters certainly are not real, the practices in which they engage are also *our* practices: they share a common structure (for example, *these* sets of relations and actions count as an instance of 'jealousy', in both our world and Othello's), and so it seems quite innocuous to claim that we can identify features of human reality in this common structure. Thus the problem of the cognitive value of literature is not whether literature can present aspects of social and cultural reality to view—surely it can, and in any case we will grant so much—but whether this presentation can in any way be described as a form of *cognitive* presentation. In other words, the challenge is to show that literature, in bringing our world to view, can teach us something about it.

Now why should it be a problem to claim that literature can offer worldly truth and knowledge? The anti-cognitive sceptic—that is, the philosopher who denies that literature is a source of worldly knowledge—has a simple way of formulating the reason for denying this. It is a problem that is most notoriously associated with traditional representational theories of art—as Plato saw and duly dismissed the idea that art is cognitively valuable—and is captured well by Arthur Danto:

Socrates spoke of art as a mirror held up to nature . . . Socrates saw mirrors as but reflecting what we can already see; so art, insofar as mirror-like, yields idle accurate duplications of the appearances of things, and is of no cognitive benefit whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

The reason the mimetic theory makes art cognitively trivial is not exclusively a matter of its casting art as 'mirror-like'. It is because it invites a much more general difficulty. Art turns out to be cognitively trivial because it can do nothing more than bring before us visions of a world with which we are already very much acquainted. And if this is so, then the strongest cognitive relation we can have to literary works of art (and all of the narrative arts, for that matter) would seem to be that we see in them aspects of our world knowledge of which we already possess. Literature may hold up reality for appreciation. But, much like an expertly crafted map of a region we already well know, the vision of reality found in literary works is without any genuine cognitive consequence. Literature's presentation of our world may be brilliant as a feat of aesthetic accomplishment, but it is ultimately a view of quite familiar territory.

We might call this the problem of *cognitive familiarity*, and the anti-cognitivist sceptic challenges that this problem will infect *any* theory that attempts to move from the idea that literature presents our world to view to the idea that literature's manner of worldly presentation is cognitively valuable. The sceptic does not challenge the idea that we can see our world in literature. His claim is that we have a dubious chance of showing this seeing to be cognitively significant. If we cannot establish this, the sceptic argues that for those aspects of reality brought to view in works of literature, we are forced to accept that our knowledge of them comes from elsewhere, at any rate not from our encounters with literary works themselves. And if this is so, then the sceptic charges that the best we can say of literature is that it *assumes* rather than *imparts* worldly knowledge. This is the form of his challenge.

### III. TEXTS AS TRUTHS?

Stated so baldly, the sceptic's challenge will not strike one as especially provocative. But if we add to it a few standard observations about the nature of literature, we will see why many philosophers are inclined to consider it devastating to the humanist intuition. To show this, let me introduce someone I will call the *truth-seeking* humanist, the humanist who believes that he can establish precisely what the sceptic denies: that literature offers us knowledge of those aspects of our world it brings to view. We will see that the truth-seeking humanist is misguided, but his mistake will tell us something important about literature. A few brief examples will suffice to bring to view what he has in mind.

*Othello*, the truth-seeking humanist brings to our attention, does not merely

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Danto, 'The Art World', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964), p. 571.

'present' jealousy to view, as though the jealousy we find there sits in the text as an immobile, granite-like presence. Its presence is rather like a fluid that runs through, and in so doing is given shape by, the events of the tragedy. At the moment Othello takes Desdemona's life we have a vision of jealousy much more complex than we find when Iago first sets to stirring this emotion in Othello. And the truth-seeking humanist suggests that through its dramatic presentation of jealousy, *Othello* yields what looks to be a genuine candidate for a claim about *what jealousy is*, that (let us agree for the sake of argument) 'jealousy is a rage that can destroy what one holds most dear'. Likewise, *Medea* presents not just 'anger' to view; it appears to be trying to tell us something about the very nature of anger. Through the progression of dramatic events, *Medea* reveals that—as the Stoic Chrysippus said we learn from this tragedy—'anger is a passion that destroys reason and judgment'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, consider all that Martha Nussbaum argues *Hecuba* can show us about our world:

I have said that this tragedy shows us a case of solid character and shows us that, under certain circumstances, even this cannot escape defilement. It also has shown us that even the good character who has not suffered any actual damage or betrayal lives always with the risk of these events. . . . In this sense nothing human is ever worthy of trust: there are no guarantees at all, short of revenge or death.<sup>4</sup>

The truth-seeking humanist has brought to our attention what is commonly called the *thematic* level of literature, the level at which a literary work shapes and structures our understanding of the features of our world it brings to view.<sup>5</sup> At what we might call the *fictional* level of interpretation, the level at which we analyse the content of the individual sentences of the literary text, we find only reports on the contours and happenings of a fictional world. But at the thematic level, the level at which the progression of dramatic events forges a distinct conception of (broadly put) life, we find a way of conceiving how a work of literature can actually try to *tell* us something about the nature of our world. Thus the truth-seeking humanist can argue that he has at least shown us that there is a way of conceiving a literary work as a chain of interpretation, of which the individual dramatic events are links and through which a claim is developed, a point pursued, until a structured insight is yielded. If this is so, it appears that the truth-seeking humanist can claim that a literary text can be *informative* of the aspects of

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion of this, see Christopher Gill, 'Did Chrysippus Understand *Medea*', *Phronesis*, vol. 28 (1983), pp. 136–149.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986), p. 419.

<sup>5</sup> It is sometimes argued that what we commonly refer to as a 'theme' requires finer distinction, otherwise we will have trouble gracefully distinguishing the conceptual subject of a novel, say romantic love, from the specific vision of this it pursues, say romantic love as a blind passion. I hope that my generic use of the term 'theme' suffices for the general point I am pursuing here.

our world it presents to view. For we have a way of seeing literary texts as fashioning the aspects of our world they present to view into an insight into their nature. We have a way of seeing how *Othello*, for example, does something more than merely present jealousy to view. By working the concept of jealousy through the various events of the tragedy, *Othello* advances claims about *what jealousy is*.

So far, so good. The truth-seeking humanist certainly is right to insist that literature is capable of moulding the aspects of our world it brings to view into distinct conceptualizations of human experience: 'jealousy' as *this* affliction of the soul, 'suffering' as *that* condition of life, and so on. This is, I would think, a claim few would take issue with. But the difficulty lies in the work the truth-seeking humanist wants these thematic statements and literary interpretations of life to do. For a literary text yields a thematic statement insofar as it allows us to 'read off' of the dramatic events a certain conceptual structure in the novel. When we explain the extension of a thematic statement, we are led not to the world but to a bond of fictional characters and events; and thus we are faced with the fact that a thematic statement 'says' nothing more than that thus and such a concept unifies or otherwise finds expression in the narrative line of a literary work. And the implication of this is that the content of a thematic statement has not epistemological but literary-critical import: it informs us of the conceptual structure of the literary work and not the nature of our world.

There is a very simple way of putting this. We might call it the problem of *unclaimed truths*. Now, need it be mentioned, *of course* a thematic statement may be true of the world, in the dull sense that any string of words with propositional content bears a truth-value. But its truth is unclaimed by the text, for the text does not assert these thematic statements *of* extra-textual reality. So, while it might be true of both *Othello's* world and ours that 'jealousy destroys what one holds most dear', *Othello* does nothing to attempt to inform us of the worldly truth of this. While the thematic statements we elicit from a literary work may be true of reality, they are not claimed *of* reality *by* the work. They are said of, and function to inform us of, the world of the text, 'facts' about its narrative line. As Lamarque and Olsen argue:

Literary appreciation is concerned with the application of a set of thematic concepts to a particular work. It is not concerned with any further reality to which these concepts might be applied in their other uses. . . . And this possibility of applying thematic concepts in literary appreciation makes no direct contribution to philosophical or theological insight, nor is it tied to any such aim. It constitutes its own form of insight, its own kind of interpretation of concepts.<sup>6</sup>

There is a kindred argument against the possibility of treating literature as a purveyor of worldly knowledge. As Gordon Graham puts it:

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 408–409.

An important difference remains between a work of art and a work of inquiry, namely that the latter has a structure of reasoning by which it moves from premise to conclusion, whereas the former does not. . . . Intellectual inquiry does not just confront the mind with facts or hypothesis, but *directs* it through a progression of thought, and it is this capacity which allows us to call these modes of *understanding*. In contrast, it seems that the best art can do is to present a point of view. Even writers sympathetic to the idea of truth in art have generally supposed that art merely expresses truth, not that it argues for it.<sup>7</sup>

When we find arguments of this sort we should read them as drawing our attention to something more than the tedious point that literature does not establish truths about the world by way of rigid proofs and justifications, which we surely already knew. The interesting problem we see alluded to here is not epistemological but classificatory, a matter of whether we would group literature with those disciplines that we take to attempt to offer knowledge. It is built into our idea of a knowledge-pursuing discipline—say history, science, or philosophy—that at the very least it offers *reasons* for taking its claims to be true of the world, that it has some argumentative structure, however minimal, that provides an incentive for believing that a text has set its sights on showing us something about the way the world is, regardless of whether it is ultimately successful or insolvent in its attempt. Even in the case of the various thought experiments and allegories we find in science and philosophy—which, like literature, describe fictional scenarios—we find the presentation of a premise, a chain of reasoning, *something* in virtue of which we take the fictions described as attempting to lead us towards a worldly truth. When we examine literature, however, we find plot occurrences rather than premises, dramatic events rather than supporting evidence, aesthetic feats rather than philosophical analysis. Now it is no surprise that we do not find a structure of argumentation in literature. But the obvious question becomes: what then is there in a literary text that would invite us to treat it as attempting to tell us about the way the world is? If literature functioned to pursue worldly knowledge, it would appear that it would have a status not much more respectable than that of texts that trade in groundless declaration and bald pronouncement—probably worse, since even in the most vacant works of new age cabalism and paranoid conspiratorial politics we find at least an illusion of reason-giving or a hoax of argumentation. But, the sceptic argues, the very fact that literature does not have this status brings home the point that literature is independent of ‘argumentative’ forms of writing rather than just a poor participant in the same search for worldly truth.

We can, of course, *use* a literary text in the pursuit of knowledge. If we allow ourselves to blow argumentation into a literary work, we will find that it offers endless ways of coming to know reality. Through our critical reflections on the world of *Othello*, we no doubt can come into possession of proud truths about our

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon Graham, ‘Learning from Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35 (1995), pp. 26–37 at p. 196.

own world, an achievement that requires nothing more than extracting the thematic statements and various visions of life we find there from their literary context and scrutinizing them as positions in a philosophical debate. But unfortunately this is of no help to the humanist intuition. While manoeuvres such as this may aid in our pursuit of worldly truth, should we take this step we lose the literary work and thus the very thing the humanist is trying to explain. It requires that we sever the stances, themes, and perspectives we find in a work from their literary context and treat them as free-floating propositions, asking what they might tell us about reality if we disregard their place and function in the text and instead treat them as isolated assertions about the way the world is. Yet the entire humanist enterprise is to identify a humanistic *literary* value, some quality or presence *in* the text that is at once also revelatory of our world. Otherwise his theory fails to be a theory of literature and reveals itself to be just an explanation of what we can do with a literary work if we steal bits and pieces of it for use as fodder for non-literary discussions. To make such a move is in effect to abandon the idea that a literary work *itself* can be revelatory of reality, and at this point it ceases to be relevant to the humanist. To move from literary text to worldly truth is to step away from that to which we want to be brought closer. The leap is alluring but unfortunately unavailable to the humanist. As Diffey puts it:

To learn from a work of art, that is, to move from what is shown in the world of the work to an assertion that obtains in the world, requires a refusal of the aesthetic stance. . . . It constitutes a further move, and out of the work, notwithstanding Derridean scepticism about the impossibility of getting out of a text and into something else, to assert of the text, 'and this is how it is'.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to see what more can be added to the sceptic's case. The sceptic began by telling us that all the humanist can say is that literature assumes rather than imparts knowledge of the world. And we can see that he is right, at least insofar as his anti-cognitivist arguments appear to make impossible the move to the idea that literature might actually be able to tell us something about the nature of extra-textual reality. Literature may hold reality up for view; but the sceptic argues that when it does, it offers it as an aesthetic object, used to texture the interior of the literary work of art, and not as a route to further worldly knowledge. The cognition-*qua*-knowledge paradigm, so central to the understanding of how other core disciplines such as science and philosophy have cognitive value, is inapplicable to literature.

#### IV. UNFULFILLED KNOWLEDGE

So how do we salvage the humanist intuition? We might begin by asking ourselves whether there isn't something unsatisfying with the way both the truth-

<sup>8</sup> Terence Diffey, 'What Can We Learn from Art?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 73 (1995), pp. 204–211 at p. 208.

seeking humanist and the anti-cognitivist sceptic carry out the debate. We feel, I would think, swindled, as though we have just seen a question of genuine significance proposed and settled in terms in which it was likely never meant to be discussed (perhaps not unlike when we argue with someone who scrutinizes the belief in morality by asking whether its rules are 'verifiable' or its propositions 'empirical'). While we can agree that literature cannot be 'cognitive' in the way the sceptic has shown it cannot be, we also feel that there is something amiss in approaching the issue as both the truth-seeking humanist and sceptic do. We feel forced to let them carry out the debate in these terms because it seems that we must if we want to do justice to the idea—one most of us would not lightly lose—that literary experience is cognitive. But we also find that we are not particularly surprised to learn that these terms turn out to be inadequate for the task at hand.

What we need is a model of cognition that shows us that we can say everything the sceptic does yet still show literary experience to be manifestly cognitive. In developing such a model, I will rely heavily on Cavell's distinction between knowing and acknowledging. I should mention that I do not take what I say here to be straightforward Cavellian exegesis. He uses this distinction to illuminate topics ranging from scepticism and Shakespeare interpretation to Hollywood cinema and moral perfectionism, and I do not pretend here to offer a systematic interpretation of Cavell's lithe use of the concept of acknowledgement in his body of work. What I do here is take a small region of his interest in the distinction and let the humanist develop it as he wishes.

I will begin with a suggestive passage from *Must We Mean What We Say*:

It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer, I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I *do not know* what (yours, his) 'being in pain' means. . . . The claim of sympathy may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or it may not.<sup>9</sup>

The important cognitive point hinted at in this passage is that there is a territory of understanding that is left unmentioned by our standard talk of knowledge, one which is revealed in our various successes and failures of acknowledgement. The cases that best bring this territory into view are those in which we find a failure of acknowledgement with an apparent success of knowledge. In the above passage, it is implied by my ability to describe you correctly as suffering that I possess knowledge of 'what suffering is'. But a tension arises in certain cases, one that points up a limitation of the concept of knowledge for yielding a fully circumscribed notion of worldly understanding. My knowledge is in place. But the failure of my knowledge to go on to take the form of acknowledgement reveals a

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), p. 263.



hollowness in how I understand what it is that I know, an emptiness or confusion in some larger region of understanding that surrounds this knowledge. And the question becomes: how might we describe this region? What sort of understanding does it address?

To help answer this, let us imagine a person I will call the Simpleton. The Simpleton, we will agree, is a sort of *mere* knower. He looks at a wounded person and rightly says 'You are in pain.' But the Simpleton 'behaves' with his knowledge in such a way that we find a certain vacancy in his grasp of what it is that he is saying. I ask him whether he thinks your injury is serious, to which he offers an earnest 'yes'. But he offers his 'yes' without any gesture that hints that by this 'yes' he understands what *he* is thereby called on to do (say, as Cavell does, 'whatever can be done'). As I begin tending to you, I yell to him that he ought to call for an ambulance. He nods in sincere agreement and then falls still. And when I tell the Simpleton that you might not recover without his assistance, he responds with an honest 'That's right' and then lapses back into inactivity. We should notice that the Simpleton succeeds in every case of knowledge, for he consistently reveals that he knows the 'truth' of the matter (that you are suffering, that this implies that you require aid, that the consequences are severe should we ignore this, and so on). But he has no further relation to your pain beyond his knowing it, beyond his ability to identify correctly your suffering and the nest of propositions this entails. In this sense we see that his knowledge is idle, lifeless, for his mind goes dead precisely when it ought to become animated. In a word, he is an idiot who just happens to know as much as we do, an eerie sort of idiot savant. What we see in the Simpleton is a failure to grasp what we might call the *demands* of knowledge, the claims knowledge makes *on us*. The hollowness we see in the Simpleton's mind is not an absence of proper knowledge but an incognizance, if you like, of the sets of responses to which this knowledge is tied and through which we naturally expect it to declare itself.

Let us look at a quite different failure of acknowledgement, that of a character we might call the Sadist. Both we and the Sadist succeed in identifying Medea as suffering. But precisely those aspects of the play that are tragic make it comic to the Sadist: Medea's suffering summons the Sadist's laughter. He reacts to Jason's betrayal of Medea as though he is watching a burlesque. He bursts at Medea's murder of her children as though it is the punchline of an outrageously funny joke. Naturally we are disturbed, for the Sadist strikes us as entirely deranged. Yet we find that with every question we put to him, the Sadist betrays that he knows what suffering is. Thus the derangement we detect in him is not a matter of his failure to cut up the world aright, as though he sees something that is not really there. He sees precisely what is there—suffering—and he looks the lunatic because in his mind laughter issues from this knowledge. What we seem to see in the Sadist's response is our concept of suffering uprooted and planted in unfamiliar soil, grounded in a context alien to the one in which we rest it. Horror

films, whatever we may think of them as artworks, offer endless examples of this. What is disturbing in a film like Fritz Lang's *M* or a movie like Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* is not merely Franz Becker's killing or Hannibal Lecter's cannibalism. The sense of the horrible these characters conjure in us is in large part a matter of their showing us how deformed and unsettling our concepts become when they are severed from the practices to which they are conventionally bound and wed with monstrous ones, 'love' as expressed through the act of murdering children, 'food' as the consumption of human flesh. Likewise the Sadist's situating of 'suffering' in the laughable does not reveal an absence of knowledge so much as a displacement of it, a failure to station his knowledge of suffering in the web of contexts that we take to be its natural home (the tragic, the pitiable, the sorrowful—whatever you will). He seems so separate from us because the concepts we share with him make such a foreign claim on his mind. And what we want to say is that by his failure to hang his knowledge on the appropriate hook of response, the Sadist reveals a disfigurement of understanding, one consisting not of botched knowledge but rather of a broken link between his concepts and the corners of our form of life to which they are tied.

The Simpleton and Sadist each reveal a certain flaw of mind, one that is confessed by their failures to acknowledge (*at all*, in the case of the Simpleton; *aright*, in the case of the Sadist) the knowledge they share with us. The Simpleton suffers a failure to understand how knowledge, we might say, configures the knower as an actor on the concrete stage of life. I called this a failure to grasp the 'claims knowledge makes *on us*', and the Sadist shows us that these claims are akin to what are often described as *claims to a community*, that through our successes and failures of acknowledgement we announce our participation in (or estrangement from) a shared form of life. In each of these characters a particular territory of worldly understanding is made visible, a form of insight revealed, by its absence in their minds. The point I want to advance is that it is a form of understanding that concerns not a grasp of the 'truth of the matter', knowledge of the nature of the bit of reality before them. It consists in a mind's attunement with what is better described as *the role* a piece of knowledge plays in a form of life, an awareness of how it grounds us in a specific weave of human culture: 'suffering' as both presenting and pushing us into that region of the world called the tragic.

Let us draw this idea out a bit more. Knowledge, as we find it in the Simpleton and Sadist, concerns a facility with dividing up the world rightly and correctly describing its particulars, a grasp of 'what something is' as a success of identifying this as that sort of thing. Acknowledgement has as its object a different act of identification. It reveals a grasp of *why* we divide up the world this way and so *how* a particular pushes us into the world when we describe it as thus and such. In a word, it is through acknowledgement that we give expression to the fact that we speak a *living* language, that our words and concepts animate a form of life. When we speak of knowledge we describe a certain intellectual relation to the world.

And what the Simpleton and Sadist showed us is that this leaves unmentioned its 'flesh', its *concreteness*, that it is something we not only identify but live in. The concept of acknowledgement underscores this point, that we have, if you like, both an intellectual and embodied relation to the world. It pieces together these two facets of our relation to the world, for in the movement from knowing to acknowledging we see revealed a mind whose knowledge brings it fully into the world it knows.

It is important to notice that the concept of acknowledgement does not specify a region of mind that is *different* from that which knowledge concerns, if we mean by this that acknowledgement describes some alternative or independent route to worldly understanding.<sup>10</sup> When we move from knowledge to acknowledgement, we are not crossing between foreign spheres of understanding. The difference is between a completeness and incompleteness of understanding, not two disparate ways of relating to the world. Knowledge, as we said earlier, must go on to take the form of acknowledgement, otherwise there is a sense in which we cannot really know what it is that we are saying. And what we mean by this is that these are two concepts that together assert an achievement of one motion of mind. What we see then is that the concept of acknowledgement picks out a standard for the attribution of a wholeness of understanding to a speaker. For it testifies that our knowledge of the world is at once also animated by the world, that there is no gap between the two. In a word, acknowledgement describes knowledge as *fulfilled*. The concepts of knowledge and acknowledgement are confederate notions. Together they function to record this completeness of understanding.

If what I have said in this section is reasonable, then surely we want to describe the difference between the acknowledger and the Simpleton, the sane person and Sadist, as cognitive. In each case, though the same knowledge is in place, we see drastically different manifestations of intelligence. If we are tempted to refuse to call the feature of understanding announced by the concept of acknowledgement 'cognitive', I would venture that it is because—oddly and sadly—we do not have the right cognitive term to describe it, though my argument is that 'acknowledgement' will work quite well for this purpose. To give into this temptation is to allow the vocabulary of truth and knowledge to hoard all of our cognitive terms, to treat them as the sole terms of cognitive illumination. And this betrays a rather gratuitous stubbornness to term 'cognitive' a concept that expresses the fulfillment of knowledge just because it cannot be described in the precise vocabulary of knowledge. If acknowledgement reveals a significant dimension of linguistic understanding, indeed if it describes a completeness of our grasp of the world, I see no reason at all not to call it cognitive.

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<sup>10</sup> This is a point Cavell's critics often fail to appreciate. His clearest statement of it can be found in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

## V. LITERATURE AS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We can now return to the anti-cognitivist sceptic. Our problem was this: the sceptic argued that even if it is the case that literature presents reality to view, it in no way yields knowledge of it in this act of presentation—thus his claim that literature does nothing more than offer idle visions of a world we already well know. This much, he argued, flows from the source of our trouble in this paper, the problem of cognitive familiarity. But what we are beginning to see is that the charge of cognitive triviality does not so easily follow from the fact of familiarity, and this is the point on which the sceptic's case hangs. If 'knowing', plainly put, does not exhaust the range of possible cognitive experience, then a textual form such as literature that cannot lead us to knowledge of the world will not on this count alone be cognitively trivial. We accept that we know those corners of the world literature brings to view (or, again, at least that it cannot be the case that we come to know them through literature). But this turns out to be a claim the humanist can graciously embrace, for it gives him ground on which to proceed. We have found a form of cognition that itself presupposes the possession of knowledge to take shape. And the humanist argues that literature, by standing upon our knowledge of the world, is thereby able to address this further region of worldly understanding.

Now there is nothing surprising we need to reveal about literature, no hitherto unnoticed feature of a novel we must unmask, to make explicit precisely how literature might do this. There is certainly no need to imitate the truth-seeking humanist and try to twist literary content in the hope of finding a way to treat it as a participant in the same game played by philosophy and other forms of truth-directed discourse—a game the sceptic has shown literature to have no interest in playing. We accept that literature does the only thing it incontestably does, namely present fictional lives lived in fictional worlds, fictions that while bringing our world into view nevertheless do not speak truths about this world. Simply put, the humanist wants us to see that if *Othello* is to illuminate our understanding of jealousy, we do not need *Othello* to tell us *anything* about what jealousy is. To make the move from knowledge to acknowledgement we need only Othello himself, this supreme animator of the knowledge of jealousy we bring to the text. We do not need to find a way to get Othello to forfeit his fictionality and become something he manifestly is not (such as a truth-claim donning a dramatic persona) to secure a connection with the cognitive. We need precisely his fiction, this Moor of Venice who offers us the story 'of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, perplex'd in the extreme' (V.ii.345–347). It is in this, in this thoroughly fictitious tale, that we see all we need to see to understand how *Othello* can effect its particular enlightenment. The general claim that has been lying on the lips of the humanist for the past few pages is that acknowledgement requires precisely what literature is in a position to give it: narrative, a story of human activity, for it is through this that *Othello* can provide the knowledge we

bring to the text with the completeness of understanding that marks a mind that is in full possession of its knowledge. Let us follow this idea.

Harold Bloom has said that Desdemona is 'our word for romantic love'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, and with the same instructive bombast, let us say that Othello is our word for jealousy. Now if this is so, a fair summary of the sceptic's argument in this paper is that we nevertheless do not, cannot, learn this word from literature. But what the humanist argues is that this is no loss, that Othello's gift to the mind lies not in his giving us knowledge of the word, but—to attribute to him another's power—in the fact that *in* him we see 'the word made flesh'. His is only fictional flesh, to be sure. But fiction, we know, is consummately capable of bringing our world to view. And what we are beginning to see is that in bringing it into view, *Othello* does not merely reflect our world back to us in the same form in which it presupposes that we are familiar with it. *Othello* returns to us this knowledge as embodied, as placed on the concrete stage of cultural practice and human comportment. That is to say, Othello acknowledges the knowledge he asks us to bring to the text. He calls upon it so that he can then go on to push it into that region of understanding left unmentioned in the sceptic's anti-cognitivist arguments.

We often think that the gap between mind and reality is closed by knowledge, that when we come into possession of truths about the way the world is, we overstep the space between thought and reality. The concept of acknowledgement reveals the possibility of a residual gap; it shows us that the concept of knowledge alone does not express understanding as it reaches all the way into the world. And the claim the humanist wants to secure is that it is this remaining divide that literature is capable of addressing and overcoming. As we saw, the concept of knowledge is silent about whether our understanding of the world is vital or idle; we saw that when our knowledge has not gone on to take the full form of acknowledgement, we have minds that know but whose knowledge is oddly immaterial, strangely removed from the world, as though we see it but from a distance. Of course this distance comes in degrees, ranging from the extreme case of a character such as the Simpleton to what I presume is the state of most of us, namely reasonably acculturated people but nevertheless people who have not been afforded the wealth of experience and insight that would come with having lived the lives chronicled in our greatest works of literary narrative. Literature takes this as its cue, speaking to the mind by addressing and attempting to overcome this distance. Literature has a unique ability to present our world to us not as a mere conceptual object but as a living world. And it is thereby able to take what is dull, wooden, or tenuous in our understanding of how our words and our concepts unite us with our world and inject it with this essential vitality of understanding, returning our knowledge to us fulfilled.

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 473.

Take the following example, one that I think should bring into full light the force of this claim. Imagine that legacy of texts we take to define our literary tradition laid out in a line. Next to it, we lay out those texts that define our philosophical tradition. Someone—imagine not a simpleton but one more like an alien—puts to us the question of what each of these textual traditions documents about our relation to the world, what he, if he should read through each of them, would come to learn about the way our world is. Most of us would find at least half of this question easy to answer. We would say, whatever else we might say, that what those texts which constitute our philosophical heritage trace and give testament to is our conceptual relation to reality, say (as Cavell might put it) our culture's claims to knowledge. Now there is an initial difficulty, a slight confusion, when we turn to our literary heritage. We wonder what literature, given the uniqueness of its manner of worldly presentation (namely *fictional* presentation), could possibly record about our relation to the world. What the humanist has shown is that the mistake is to think that we need to find a way to describe literature as in some way doing what philosophy does (a temptation many humanists have felt since Plato pitted poets against philosophers). And what is promising about the approach outlined here is that we now see that we can avoid this temptation without fearing that we will thereby make literature speechless about our cognitive relation to our world. Simply put, if those textual forms such as philosophy trace our culture's claims to knowledge, literature, far from being inferior, sets its goal farther. By weaving the knowledge it assumes into the fabric of the social, literature traces and gives testament to the bond between our words, our concepts, and the concrete body of our culture. And in so doing, literature records not the first but the final word in our culture's awareness of its world, the word that effectively concludes the story we have to offer of the nature of our world as we experience it and find ourselves within it. We might say that if we had only philosophy texts, we would have a chronicle of only half of our relation to our world. There would be an emptiness, a silence about what lies on the other side of this gap that knowledge alone does not bridge. Literature is that corner of intellectual activity that archives how understanding fully crosses this remaining divide between mind and world. It is not in competition with philosophy, but, in its highest form, literature is the completion of its project.<sup>12</sup>

John Gibson, Department of Philosophy, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA. Email: jgibson@temple.edu

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