Literature and Knowledge

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Can fictional literature be a source of knowledge about ourselves and the world in which we live? Can novels, plays and poetry tell us something important and true about who we are, about others, and about life generally? The question seems to be of interest not only to writers on literary theory and aesthetics, but to people generally. Everyday comments about literature - from casual conversations, to newspaper reviews, to the blurb on dust-jackets – often seem to take it for granted that literature is about something variously called ‘real life,’ ‘human experience,’ ‘the world we live in,’ ‘the real world’, or ‘reality.’ Two people discussing a play will disagree about whether ‘people behave like that in real life’; a reviewer will chide a poet for having too little to say about ‘human experience’; or a dust-jacket will announce that a novelist brings us ‘face to face with the real world we live in.’ Phrased more formally, such views ‘abound among literary theorists, critics, and writers on aesthetics. Monroe Beardsley, for example, has written that

"To decide with what attitudes and expectations aesthetic objects are best approached ... we have to ask ... whether or in what way they connect with reality, that is with the rest of the world in which they exist. This problem is most acute in literature, for by their nature literary works seem to have an essential and unavoidable reference to, and concern with, reality."

Uncontroversial though such a view might seem at first sight, it becomes decidedly less so when we look at it more closely. Beardsley’s comment suggests that literature is about the real world in some way. But in what way exactly? If one can infer from his comment that literature is a source of knowledge about ‘the world’, about ‘human experience’, or ‘reality’, what kind of knowledge might that be? Stated this way, the issue has proved far from uncontroversial. The question ‘What kind of knowledge about the world, if any, does fictional literature provide?’ has generated lively debate among writers on aesthetics and literary theorists, and has led to some quite sharp differences of opinion.

There is no time to review that debate here, but one question that has commanded a lot of attention is whether or not literature can be regarded as a source of what has been called ‘propositional knowledge’, or ‘propositional truth’ - that is, whether literature is ‘fact-stating’ in the sense that it contains propositions or statements about the world that can be described as true or false.

Opinions on this matter are sharply divided. Some, like Lamarque and Olsen in their book, Truth, Fiction and Literature argue that the ‘Propositional Theory of Literary Truth’ is quite untenable. Others, like Peter Kivy in his book, Philosophies of Arts, claim by contrast that part of what is involved in any reader’s appreciation of a work of literature is deciding whether its ‘statements about the world are true or false.’ And then there are some, like David Novitz in his book, Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination, who try to straddle both points of view by suggesting that while literature is in part a source of propositional truth, it is also a source of what he calls nonpropositional, ‘empathic beliefs and knowledge’.

Though this debate has lasted for several decades now, there is little sign of any emerging consensus, or indeed, one has to say, of any conspicuously new and fresh approaches to it. The debate seems, in short, to have stalled, and it is high time, I would argue, to go back to the beginning, and take a close look at the question being asked.
That question, as I have said, is whether fictional literature can be source of knowledge about ‘the world’ or ‘reality’, and if so, what kind of knowledge that might be. When one examines the debate so far, one finds that a very noticeable feature has been a tendency to focus strongly on the word ‘knowledge’ and spend very little time asking what might be meant in the context by the notion of ‘reality’ or ‘the world’. This seems to me to be a mistake, and in what I say today I want to try to restore the balance a little, and see where that might lead us. So a key question for me will be: In the context of the question we’re asking, what are the possible meanings of terms such as ‘reality’ or ‘the world’ or ‘human experience’ and how might the meaning we ascribe to these terms affect the conclusion we reach about whether or not literature can be a source of knowledge or truth? I want ultimately to claim that the conclusion we reach is affected in a quite fundamental way – and in a way that powerfully influences the view we take about the very function of literature.

One brief preliminary remark. I will assume in what follows - there being no time to argue the point - that literature concerns itself with ‘the reality’ or ‘the world’ of individual experience – that is, the world as perceived and apprehended by the single individual. I see this as distinct from, for example, reality in its collective guise as history or sociology, for instance, or from the reality pursued by science in its descriptions of the physical universe. This is not of course to imply that history or science, or any other sphere of human activity, cannot become elements within the world of literature. It is simply to say that if there is a ‘reality’ or ‘world’ about which literature provides knowledge, it is not – or not essentially - the world as understood through the prism of historical or sociological theory, or the world as revealed through the methodology of scientific experimentation, but the world as immediately experienced by the living individual.

That said, let’s proceed to the main issue and begin by considering the following sample statements:

* To live in a quiet suburban setting after the ordeals she had endured was to live in a different world.

* Out of this chaos there eventually emerged a new reality.

* This was his first genuine experience of love.

In each case - and one can invent many similar examples - there is an implication that what is designated by the terms ‘world,’ ‘reality,’ and ‘experience’ is something specific and identifiable – something that has acquired a particular character and significance. In this context, the terms do not denote merely a random mixture of unconnected impressions, or a bewildering jumble of people, things, and events. Each sentence would in fact be nonsensical if this were so. There is an implication in each case that the ‘something’ designated by the terms in question is something apprehended, something that has taken a certain shape in the understanding.

By contrast, there are statements such as these:

* She found the trials and tribulations of the world too much for her.

* His schemes always foundered when they came in contact with reality.

* Experience is the best teacher.

In contexts such as these, I suggest, the meaning of the words in question has changed. Instead of denoting something that has acquired a particular character and significance, they now suggest the significantly different notion of simply ‘the way things are’ or, ‘the many and various things that happen.’ The sense of something specific and recognisable has faded into the background. Things
are ‘real’ in this second sense simply because they exist or occur. Here, the term ‘world,’ or its equivalents, signifies nothing more than the uncontrollable, unpredictable ‘brute facts’ of existence.

How does this distinction help us? For the moment I want to focus just on the first of the two meanings discussed – that is, where there is an implication that the ‘something’ designated by the terms ‘world,’ ‘reality,’ and ‘experience’ is something identifiable and apprehended - something that has, in a sense, become known.

Now, we are all familiar with comments of the following kind by critics and literary theorists (this one is by Jonathan Culler but many others might have said it): ‘literature takes as its subject ... the ordering, interpreting, and articulating of [human] experience’. Or another example (this time by David Novitz): ‘literature is one of the ways in which we are able to make sense of and come to know the ... world in which we live.’ Such comments are not at all uncommon. But once we ascribe to Culler’s and Novitz’s words ‘experience’ and ‘world’ the meaning we are now considering, we immediately see a problem – because we now appear to be talking about coming to know something that we regard as already known. Culler’s statement, for example, would imply that ‘order’ is being conferred on something that already has order – in the sense, as we have said, that experience has already ‘acquired a particular character and significance’. Novitz’s claim would imply that sense is being conferred on something that already has sense – because, as we have said, we are not speaking of something that is merely a random mixture of unconnected impressions. Clearly, there is a problem here. We seem to have uncovered a kind of conceptual redundancy – something that, while appearing to explain something, merely says the same thing twice.

To escape from this dilemma, one might perhaps argue that the order or meaning made available through literature is different from, or additional to, that which things already possess. This would be to claim in effect that there are two categories of meaning involved – a meaning that is somehow pre-existent in reality, and a meaning that reality derives from the literary work. Yet this argument raises more questions than it answers. If there is a pre-existent meaning, what is its nature and source? Is the pre-existent meaning different in kind from that conferred by literature? If so, in what way – and how might the two different kinds of meanings relate to each other? If they are of the same kind, does that imply that reality is somehow inherently like its portrayal in literature? Whether the same or different, what is the relative importance of the two? In particular, how significant is the meaning contributed by literature? Is it just something superficial – merely a kind of ornamentation added to the pre-existing meaning? Or is it more important than this?

One might perhaps attempt to sweep away this long list of questions with an argument of the following kind: Literature describes a world, or reality, that initially possesses only limited meaning – a world only partly understood. The function of literature, one might then say, is to bring that world into sharper focus - to clarify its meaning and enable us to understand it more fully. In practice, something very like this view seems quite widespread in literary theory and criticism, particularly in those familiar varieties that suggest that the role of the novel, play or poem is to ‘sharpen’ or ‘refine’ our perceptions, or to ‘heighten awareness’ of what was previously only imperfectly understood. Yet, in essence, this is simply a restatement of the unsuccessful argument we have just considered and leads to the same series of questions. If the world has already been ‘partly understood,’ what is the source of that partial understanding? Does it involve a form of meaning different from that contributed by literature and, if so, different in what way? How do the two kinds of meaning relate to each other? What is the significance of literature’s contribution? Merely an embellishment? The argument still relies, in short, on the notion of a pre-existent meaning whose nature, origin and importance are unknown. Phrases such as ‘sharpening perceptions’ or ‘heightening awareness’ may add a little rhetorical force to the proposition, but the underlying problem we have uncovered has not been resolved.
So where do we go from here? Let us now look at the second possibility discussed above - that is, when we take the terms ‘reality,’ ‘experience,’ and ‘the world’ to signify what I have described as ‘the uncontrollable, unpredictable "brute facts" of existence’. In this case there is no suggestion that we are dealing with something that has already acquired a particular character and significance. The notion of a ‘real world’ can still be entertained but only in the sense that objects can still be said to exist, and events still to occur. This, in other words, is existence in an unapprehended state, in which words such as ‘world,’ or ‘reality’ merely signify ‘the way things are’ and the haphazard pressure of events.

What might be the consequences for the present discussion of interpreting the terms ‘world,’ ‘reality’ or ‘experience’ in this sense? I’d like to approach this question in a somewhat indirect way, so at this point I want to make a minor detour before returning to what will be the final stage of the argument.

It’s a commonplace of literary criticism – and indeed of art theory and criticism generally - that every enduring work of art seems to convey an impression of internal consistency, or what is sometimes called ‘unity.’ This need not, I would argue, imply structural unity. A work may lack all but the barest essentials of structure and, like Pickwick Papers for instance, have an abundance of ‘loose ends,’ yet still convey a sense of underlying consistency - a sense that it embodies a particular kind of world, with its own distinctive character that never seems to vary no matter how much its mood or subject matter might alter. Whatever one may think of the ramshackle structure of Pickwick Papers (to stay with this example for a moment), one can recognise in every page something like what Chesterton describes as ‘that sense of everlasting youth – a sense as of the gods gone wandering in England.’ It is a world to which everything, from the honest, artless Pickwick, to the roguish Jingle, to the crafty Dodson and Fogg, seem naturally to belong - and in which, just as importantly, any character from (for example) The Brothers Karamazov or The Possessed would seem grotesquely out of place. Every enduring literary work seems in this way to present its own characteristic ‘world’ which, however difficult for the critic to analyse and describe, gives the impression of something distinctive and consistent. The phenomenon seems as little related to ‘content’ as it is to structure. The strange, unpredictable world of Ionesco’s The Bald Prima Donna seems as distinctive and as much ‘all of a piece’ as Les Liaisons Dangereuses in which the action proceeds like a well executed game of chess.

Observations of this kind are not new. They’ve been made many times. The difficulty, however, is to know what follows from them. The answer often given in aesthetics and literary theory is that a desire for unity or order lies at the basis of all artistic creation, that this responds to a deeply felt human need, and that the contemplation, or experience, of order is something inherently ‘pleasing’ or ‘satisfying’ for both the artist and his or her audience. The disappointing feature of this familiar argument, to my mind, is that it usually comes to a full stop at that point. It doesn’t go on to explain why this should be so. What exactly is the nature and origin of the human need in question? Why, after all, should order be inherently pleasing or satisfying? And assuming it does have this effect, what level of importance should we attach to this particular form of pleasure? Would it be something of major importance in human life, or just a kind of added frill? If it is important, why do we think so? If, on the other hand, it’s just something pleasant to indulge in now and then, why do we claim – as we so often do - that literature, and art in general, are human achievements of major importance?

This brings me back from my detour, because one can now begin to see the relevance of the second interpretation of the terms ‘world,’ ‘reality’ and ‘experience’ discussed above - that is, the interpretation that regards these words as signifying the not-apprehended, the mere ‘brute facts’ of existence. If this is what’s meant, the familiar claim that literature gives ‘order’ or ‘meaning’ to reality takes on a more comprehensible and much more profound significance. Unlike the
alternative, this interpretation does not involve the puzzling idea that the meaning provided by the literary work is something superadded to a meaning already present - and of unknown origin and uncertain significance, as we've noted. Instead, we are now treating the literary work as the way in which, from the perspective of the individual, the world ceases to be merely the realm of the unpredictable, uncontrollable brute fact and becomes something of human significance. The reason why the meaning or order provided by the work is important if matters are viewed in this light, is not simply that it is somehow ‘pleasing’ or ‘satisfying’. It is because this is how human experience understood merely as blind contingency becomes, instead, something apprehended. This does not of course imply that literature, or art generally, in any way changes or overcomes what I have called ‘the brute facts’ of life - the ‘thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.’ Nevertheless, while nothing is changed, everything is transformed. Instead of something to which the human individual merely submits, existence becomes something on which a human stamp has been placed - something of significance, even if of tragic significance, rather than something of mute indifference.

The French writer, André Malraux, has expressed the point I am making here in the following way: ‘All products of the fiction-making arts’, Malraux writes,

"rouse in the spectator feelings more involved than a mere response to ‘art’ or ‘beauty’… Why is it that Anna Karenina, the story of a banal adultery, so grips the reader? The events of Anna’s life, the way certain of them might stir the memory of a woman reading them and cause her to think of herself in the heroine’s place, differ from the novel in this respect: by the living Anna the events of her life are undergone, whereas by the reader, they are apprehended, possessed, by virtue of the art of Tolstoi. The difference between real life and its portrayal consists in the elimination of destiny."

If I were wishing to describe what is involved here as a form of knowledge, the phrase ‘propositional knowledge’ would not seem to me to be the right choice, because that term implies statements whose truth or falsity can be verified against a known state of affairs. The ‘knowledge’ we are now discussing would be much more suitably described as a form of ‘annexation’: that is, the transformation of what was previously in the realm of the unapprehended – that is, outside the realm of the known - into the known.

Finally, it’s worth adding that the question to which this paper has offered an answer does not simply go away if the answer I have given is rejected. One will still need to explain what is meant by terms such as ‘the world,’ ‘reality’ and ‘experience’ in the context we have been considering, and in particular whether or not they signify something already apprehended by the individual before literature performs its role. If one thinks they do, thus rejecting the approach adopted here, the difficulties explained earlier immediately resurface. If ‘the world’ in question already possesses some form of meaning, what is the source of that meaning? How significant is literature’s contribution? Of major importance, or merely pleasing ornamentation?

One might of course choose to ignore the whole issue, and simply leave terms such as ‘the world,’ ‘reality’ or ‘experience’ undefined. This, I’ve suggested earlier, is what has largely been done in the debate so far. Yet to do so is to accept the presence of an obvious equivocation at the very heart of the analysis. For the purposes of informal, everyday conversation, such as those mentioned in the introduction to this paper, it obviously matters little if the ‘real world’ or the ‘human experience’ with which literature is said to be concerned remain something vague and undefined. But a philosophical analysis cannot afford such luxuries. To ask whether or not literature is a source of knowledge about reality, leaving ‘reality’ as an undefined term in the question, seems, in philosophical terms, to be a very dubious proceeding indeed. It is, I would argue, to court confusion – which is perhaps one reason why debate in this area seems to have become stalled.