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## *Literature and Truth: Revisiting Stolnitz's Anti-cognitivism*

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*In this paper I address Jerome Stolnitz's famous article "On the cognitive triviality of art," with the aim of defending aesthetic and literary cognitivism against the charges Stolnitz issues at it therein. My defence of literary cognitivism is grounded in contemporary epistemology, which, I argue, is more embrative of cognitive values of literature traditionally invoked by literary cognitivists. My discussion is structured against Stolnitz's individual arguments, dedicated in particular to the problem of literary truth. After exploring what such notion might amount to, I move on to address the problems of applicability and triviality of literary truths, and I end by defending literature as a cognitively valuable social practice.*

**Keywords:** Art, cognitivism, knowledge, literature, Jerome Stolnitz, truth.

### *1. Preliminary remarks: literature's cognitive dimension*

Back in 1992 Jerome Stolnitz published "On the cognitive triviality of art," a paper which to this day remains one of the most famous and influential sources of arguments against aesthetic cognitivism (AC): a view that art is cognitively valuable. In conclusion, Stolnitz wrote:

In either case, there is no method of arriving at [the truth] in art and no confirmation or possibility of confirmation in art. Artistic truths, like the works of art that give rise to them, are discretely unrelated and therefore form no corpus either of belief or knowledge. Hence formal contradictions are tolerated effortlessly, if they are ever remarked. Only rarely does an artistic truth point to a genuine advance in knowledge. Artistic truths are, preponderantly, distinctly banal. Compared to science, above all, but also to history, religion, and garden variety knowing, artistic truth is a sport, stunted, hardly to be compared. (342)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from Stolnitz (2004).

In this paper, I analyse Stolnitz's anti-cognitivist arguments from the perspective of contemporary epistemology. I argue that his criticism of art's cognitive value rests on an oversimplified view of what constitutes such value: as evident from the quote, Stolnitz grounds it on the notion of artistic truth and sets up his paper as a list of difficulties involved in finding such truth. I believe his arguments can be met, which is what I am mostly concerned with here. However, my paper is indirectly intended as a contribution to the contemporary aesthetic and literary cognitivism, and therefore, its scope is greater than Stolnitz's. I presuppose that art's cognitive value is grounded not solely in its capacity to deliver truths, but in its capacity to sustain and animate many of our cognitive processes, such as thinking, reflecting, scrutinizing, understanding, developing opinions and exercising judgments.<sup>2</sup>

Given Stolnitz's focus, I concentrate my discussion on literature, with the aim of epistemologically providing a defence of its epistemic reliability. Following many who have provided accounts of literature's cognitive value, I see it as a repository of human experience, as an archive of humanly important stories which tell us something about the big wide world, other people, and ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Literature's cognitive value stems from the fact that it feeds directly into our intellectual demands: it tells us about things we care about as reflective human beings, as social agents, as participants in public life, as individuals who struggle to cope with whatever the world brings on them. In light of its doing so, literature demands a particular kind of engagement, one which asks us to exercise our reflective, emotional, imaginative and perceptive capacities.<sup>4</sup> Stolnitz however does not share such a conception of literature. As one of the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century advocator of disinterestedness as the key aesthetic attitude, Stolnitz defends art's value on the basis of its formal features, rather than on the basis of its representational or expressive dimension. His account of art's cognitive triviality rests on a comparison between art and other practices considered cognitively valuable, namely science, history and religion.<sup>5</sup> Indirectly, he presupposes epistemic monism, a view according

<sup>2</sup> Insightful discussions over what is at stake in debate about literature's (and art's) cognitive value are found in Davies (2007), Gaut (2005, 2006), Gibson (2007), Graham (1996), Lamarque (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Nussbaum (1990) and Gibson (2007).

<sup>4</sup> In insisting on literature's capacity to reveal aspects of the world to us, I am not implying that it should not be attended in a way which reveals its literary value—literary stance is, on my view, compatible with an epistemological approach to it, in a manner defended by M. Rowe (2010) in his criticism of Lamarque and Olsen's (1994) view. Though here I can't specify my claim, I do not think of my approach as an instance of instrumentalization of literature, as some scholars (e.g. Derek Attridge (2015)) do.

<sup>5</sup> Though some of his statements regarding science's veritistic deliverances are controversial, I will not challenge him on that basis. Rather, I will go step by step through his claims and show that contemporary literary cognitivism, aided by most recent developments in epistemology, can successfully fight off his arguments.

to which truth is the only epistemic good. My approach is different. Notwithstanding literature's artistic value, our engagements with literature, I argue, invite epistemological assessment. We form beliefs on the bases of what we read, we make judgments, particularly moral, about what we read, we think differently about concepts we considered familiar prior to reading and we feel complex emotions for fictional characters. Therefore, we have to explore epistemic aspects of literary engagements, and, more importantly, explain why these aspects are more complex than presupposed by Stolnitz's monistic paradigm.<sup>6</sup>

An expanded view of literature's cognitive value is supported by the recent developments in epistemology, particularly by the 'epistemic pluralism'.<sup>7</sup> The main aspect of pluralism is its expansion from truth to various other states (such as acknowledgement and understanding) and processes (such as weighting evidence, formulating hypotheses, reflecting on possibilities etc.) that are recognized as cognitively valuable. Since the time of Aristotle, literature has been credited with giving rise to such states and processes—usually referred to as indirect benefits—and now finally epistemology can ground its capacity for doing so. By indirect benefits, I assume various ways in which we come to think about the world as the result of our experience with the literary work. Literature can deepen our understanding of phenomena it brings to view by showing us some of their aspects we might have been unaware of. It can make us adopt a different perspective on things by showing us nuances we did not recognize as relevant. It can provide opportunities to reflect on our experience, principles we endorse, attitudes we hold, values and virtues we cherish and the like. By offering vivid and usually rather detailed descriptions of experiences of fictional characters, it can bring to view experiences that we didn't have opportunities to undergo firsthand. Literature can influence our imagination and make us better at counterfactual thinking and moral reasoning.<sup>8</sup> While Stolnitz might have a point in showing how hard (though not impossible!) it is to talk of truth in the context of literature, he is wrong in denying literature its cognitive value. With the right epistemology in place, his arguments lose their sharpness.

From the standpoint of epistemology, the most promising explanation of the mechanism that enables such cognitive transfers is, on my

<sup>6</sup> It is important to stress my epistemological approach, in order not to lose sight of my focus here. For the most part, literary cognitivists aim at exploring the relationship between literature's cognitive value and its overall value. Against that background, one can challenge literature's cognitive value by denying (i) that literature is cognitively valuable, (ii) that its cognitive dimension matters for or determines its aesthetic value or (iii) both. My approach however is narrower, in that I respond only to (i). I aim to show that literature is cognitively valuable, not in a trivial sense in which it might occasionally contain true propositions, but in light of its deliberate dedication to exploring issues that humans care about.

<sup>7</sup> See David (2001) for epistemic monism and Riggs (2002, 2008) and Kvanving (2005) for pluralism.

<sup>8</sup> For the latest research on this issue see Young's contribution to this volume.

view, testimony. A literary work can be seen as a special kind of testimony in which an author assumes the role of an informant and the reader that of a listener.<sup>9</sup> As in any testimonial exchange, in order for a listener to learn something, the informer has to be sincere and reliable, and a listener should not trust blindly but on the basis of evidence that supports the testimony (even if such evidence consists of the prior reliability of a particular informer). While literature, as creative and imaginative writing, seems to stand opposite to a truthful and reliable account of events, I will show that in many cases, there are no reasons to exclude literary authors from domain of trustworthy informers. In addition, influenced by Jennifer Lackey's account of testimony (Lackey 2008), I claim that we learn from what others are telling us, not from what they believe. Therefore, the fact that literary fiction invites the attitude of make-believe rather than believe does not render it unreliable. However, to properly see it as a source of cognitive gains, the narrow view of testimony should be extended: testimony should not be confined to transmission of propositions that the informer believes to be true, and sought-after by the audience.<sup>10</sup> Rather, testimony is more embracive of other sorts of verbal (and written) exchanges among humans and it has no restrictions on the subject matter or the form in which it is given.<sup>11</sup> Such instances of testimony can result in indirect cognitive gains as described above, provided a listener is willing to engage with the content of informer's claims and evaluate them from the perspective of her set of beliefs, her experience and tacit knowledge of the world and empirically developed capacity to discriminate good and bad informants.

With these preliminary remarks we can turn to Stolnitz.

## 2. *Literary truths*

Stolnitz begins his criticism of the cognitive value of art by attacking the notion of artistic method and artistic truth. "We have a relatively clear and firm conception of how science arrives at its truths", he says, "but a 'method of artistic truth' is not matter for debate and hardly makes sense..." In addition, "scientific truths, once arrived at, are truths about the great world", but it is altogether unclear whether "the arts give us truths about the great world" (337).

As a way of response to these statements, two things should be noted. First, many literary authors report conducting a fare amount of research prior to writing their works. Although on Stolnitz's view, a literary work "has no reference beyond itself" (337), authors and the audience alike have often spoken of literature *being about* the world.

<sup>9</sup> I develop this analogy in Vidmar (2012b), in Vidmar (2013) and in Prijić and Vidmar (2012). I refer to it as a fictional testimony.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion, see Lackey (2008).

<sup>11</sup> I rely on Jennifer Lackey's characterization of the broad view of testimony (see Lackey 2008). See also Millar (2010).

Gregg Crane is but one literary scholar who emphasizes the extent to which authors of realistic novels are committed to truthful representations. These writers, he explains, “share a general conception of fiction as a detailed and accurate representation of historically specific characters and settings—their manners, ways of dress, speech patterns, social habits, main concerns, and topics of conversation” (Crane 2007: 156). On Crane’s view, literary realism is “empiricist in orientation”, grounded upon “concrete examples”, focused on an “exploration of the here and now”, on the “world of concrete personal experiences”, “inductive rather than deductive, experimental and open to uncertainty” (Crane 2007: 157–8). Given such a tradition of investigating the issues one writes about, where such investigations often take the form similar to empirical scientific investigation, it makes sense to think of literary authors as testifiers: through their work, they are telling us what they see in the world, and how they see it. The ‘method of artistic truth’ is not all that different from other methods we rely upon to gain knowledge, and from other means through which knowledge is conveyed to us. Naturally, the crucial difference is the fact that, unlike in regular cases of testimony, authors are not under the obligation to tell the truth. However, at least with respect to those who commit themselves to realism, we should not presume they are feeding us with falsities.<sup>12</sup> As I mentioned in the introductory part, readers, as receivers of authors’ testimony share the burden of carefully assessing whether what they are told is likely to be true or not. They can do this in light of their familiarity with literary practice and with their overall experience of the world. Against such a background, they can differentiate between novels which offer reliable accounts of their subject/theme nexus and those that do not. Even a glimpse of a novel by Theodore Dreiser or Henry James, in comparison to a novel by Danielle Steel, reveals striking differences in how these authors approach their topic and represent their subject. For an audience who has the capacity to discriminate good testimony from bad, the later work will not be considered a valuable source (though it can be an enjoyable read).

Moreover, it is not quite so that ‘literary truth’ is not subject to critical evaluation and occasional refutation, primarily by literary critics. Works which aim to be ‘true to the world’ but fail, are criticized on the account of their epistemic unreliability. One way at least where such practice is obvious relates to the low art vs. high art distinction. Trashed for its lack of psychological reality in characters’ presentation, for its highly simplified accounts of political, social and other forces operative in society and for overall ignorance of the complexities of ‘human predicament’, low art novels do not collect praise for their cognitive impact and are often castigated for the perspective they offer.

<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere I offered an account of how non-realistic literary works satisfy the condition of reliability, see Vidmar (2012a).

That leaves us with the problem of explaining the notion of 'literary truth'. Some have tried to do so by claiming that literary truth is a sort of a *sui generis* kind. Inviting severe criticism from Peter Lamarque, Iris Murdoch talks about "artist's just and compassionate vision of the world" which reveals "the real quality of human nature" (taken from Lamarque, 1996, 97). As Lamarque pointed out, this line of defence is not promising since it only obliges a defender of literary cognitivism to provide an account of this special kind of truth and then to clarify how it relates to our cognitive pursuits. As explained in my preliminary remarks, on the view I am defending, literature is a source of truth about the great world and its complexities and it can reveal 'qualities of human nature', but if by 'real' Murdoch has in mind some kind of meta-physical properties that are only discoverable through art, then I share Lamarque's worries. To the extent that literature is concerned with the real world, the truths it delivers are truths about that very world.

Stolnitz disagrees, claiming that we lack a criterion on how to recognize an artistic (literary) truth, whereas we do not lack such criterion in other domains. Even if it might be objected that religious beliefs "are indisputably true of the great world" (338), the fact remains that statements like 'Man is the creature of God' is a "recognizably religious truth" (338). The problem, he claims, with literary truth is that it is altogether unclear what such truth would look like or what it would amount to.

I do not think this is a serious problem for literary cognitivism. In one, rather trivial sense, literary truths are those truths that are obtained from literature. Given that there are no limits to the topics that literature deals with, there are no boundaries to the kinds of truth we can find in literature.<sup>13</sup> But this speaks in favour of the cognitive value of literature, rather than against it, since it reveals how rich a source of truth literature is. Literature is concerned with all kinds of truths pertaining to all kinds of domains, without restriction. Even the most random survey of works from different historical periods or literary genres reveals that there's no restriction on themes in literature. Literature concerns itself with all aspects and domains of being human. Consequently, all sorts of truths can be found in literature: historical, biological, sociological, philosophical, anthropological etc.<sup>14</sup> The notion of literary truth can only refer to literature as a source, not to a special kind of truth distinctive of literature.

<sup>13</sup> Notice the analogy with the things we learn from the newspaper, developed by Noel Carroll (2007). Although we learn all sorts of things from newspapers, we do not have a clear conception of newspaper truth, nor do we need one in order to take newspapers as reliable.

<sup>14</sup> Stolnitz himself acknowledges this: "It now falls out why there was, when we began, no trouble in finding clear cases of scientific, historical, religious, and garden variety truths, whereas no clear examples of artistic truth came to mind. None of its truths are peculiar to art. All are proper to some extra-artistic sphere of the great world." (341). Well, that is precisely what I want my epistemological analysis to reveal.

Committed to finding an artistic truth, Stolnitz turns to *Pride and Prejudice* and comes up with one potential candidate: 'Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep apart two attractive people living in Hertfordshire in Regency England' (338). If literary cognitivist is right, then this is one of the truths we might extract from Austen's masterpiece. However, Stolnitz claims, this statement cannot be cognitively valuable, since it doesn't amount to anything but to the summary of the novel, and that is not what literary cognitivist is after. If anything, it is the *fictional* truth supported by the text, rather than a 'worldly' truth supported by the state of the affairs in the world. However, Stolnitz misinterprets the function that this proposition, which indeed refers to the fictional world, can have for the cognitive economy of a reader. The problem here is not that the truth extracted from the novel is fictional; rather, the problem is that it is all together wrongly identified as that what the reader should extract from the work. What matters is not that a reader reaches the conclusion about two people being kept apart by pride and prejudice, but that he comes to understand the role that pride and prejudice might have in keeping people apart. Pride and prejudice both signal a certain cognitive and moral deficiency. One whose judgments are clouded by prejudice remains blind to how things really are, and pride keeps one from reflecting upon one's own mistakes and sustains one in one's arrogance. This is what Austen's novel puts to view and becoming aware of the intellectual and ethical malfunctions that spring from pride and prejudice is the lesson we should be concerned with in the experience with this work.<sup>15</sup>

To understand why focusing solely on a principle we might deduct from the work is not a good strategy to account for literature's cognitive value, consider Stolnitz's second candidate: "Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart". This formulation goes beyond the fictional setting of the subject level and becomes an abstract claim, which Stolnitz finds problematic:

Yet in abandoning Hertfordshire in Regency England, we give up the manners and morals that influenced the sayings and doings of the hero and heroine. (...) Their motivations and behaviour respond to and are thus largely shaped by these other people, fictional all, and to each other, of course, fictional too. (339)

The worry raised here concerns the fact that literary truth we are trying to deduct is necessarily entwined with the fictional world: details of the fictional world give rise to the truth itself. Extracting that truth leads us to either offer a summary of the novel (as was the case with the first candidate), or to peel down all the fictional layers until noth-

<sup>15</sup> Goldman (2013) has offered an insightful epistemological reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, claiming that cognitive benefits of the novel stem from its showing what is involved in a mature moral judgement. E. M. Dadlez ed. (2009) goes even further in revealing the novels' cognitive values, by drawing parallels between Austen's treatment of pride and prejudice and that of David Hume. Both philosophers make obvious the cognitive depth of this particular work.



ing but the bare proposition is left (the second candidate). But in this case it is hard to see what gives support to such a bare proposition, and how such a bare proposition can be cognitively valuable. If the truth is derived from a literary work, it is unsupported by the real world. But if it is so generalizable as to be independent of the work itself, then, even if it has cognitive value, that value cannot be traced back to the work itself.<sup>16</sup> Seemingly, we have no way of accounting for the intuition that we learn certain things from literature and are justified in doing so.

This dilemma might be efficient only if we presuppose that the content of literary works is entirely made up. However, if we presuppose that literary writers report what they see in the world, the fact that a fictional character's pride keeps her from being happy is not a fact solely found in literature; it is a statement referring to what people do in the real world. Let us not forget that Austen is to this day considered a master in realistically capturing details of domestic life and her fiction is repeatedly praised for the true representation of social and economic, among other, aspects of her time. Against Stolnitz's view, the fact that the setting and characters are fictional does not render her novels silent on how the world is. In fact, "she applies the microscope to human character and motivation" which makes her novels unique "as representations of universal patterns of behaviour, and as documentation of an aspect of the provincial society of her time" (Carter and McRae 1998: 236). Stolnitz puts a lot of emphasis on the fact that the characters and the settings are fictional. Consequently, he argues, the 'lesson' we deduct from reading about their interactions, whichever that is, cannot be justified on the basis of fictional account. However, this argument only works against the assumption that 'fictional' equals 'false', which is not correct. Most literary aestheticians nowadays argue that fictional is not opposed to factual. It is a pragmatic principle signalling the kind of description we are dealing with and the range of activities at our disposal with respect to what is described, but it doesn't imply we cannot profit cognitively from what we read in it.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. *Normative power and applicability of literary truths*

In the previous part I tried to mitigate Stolnitz's view that there are no literary truths, by pointing to empirically-based realistic writing and by noting the width of literature as a source of truth. Moreover, I argued that the method of collecting literary truths is not as efficient in generating cognitive benefits as contemplation on the themes presented, and I argued that the fictional setting of the novel is not an obstacle to its cognitive potential. Stolnitz might concede to my claim, but he has a further list of arguments against LC. One such is 'the problem of quantification':

<sup>16</sup> For a similar dilemma, see Lamarque (1996).

<sup>17</sup> See Matravers (2014).

The initial statements refer to Miss Bennet and Mr Darcy, or Ajax and Creon. Do the statements of psychological truth refer to all or most or few of the flesh-and-blood beings they designate? How can we know? The drama or novel will not tell us. Praises of its 'universality' must do more than beg the question or blur it. (339)

The problem of quantification boils down to asking about the referent of the truths revealed in the work. Even if there are truths to be gained from literature, such as various psychological insights, Stolnitz claims that it is hard to understand to whom these truths refer to. Greek tragedies' concern with the question of how *hybris* influences human life, argues Stolnitz, does not help us answer whether "*hybris* must destroy/may destroy a great man in history [some great men?][all great men?] who..." (339).

I want to approach this challenge from two angles. The first one has to do with modality of the truths revealed in the literary work: what is the normative power of the psychological insight that readers can pick up from literary works? If Stolnitz's analysis of Greek tragedies is correct and at least one lesson from these tragedies is the 'hybris affects human life', should we conclude that people must or may become the victim of the *hybris*? Literary cognitivists often point to novels such as *Ana Karenina* and *Madam Bovary*, claiming that they reveal what is like to be in an unhappy marriage. Such novels, cognitivists claim, help us understand the psychological motivation that induces one to commit adultery. However, following Stolnitz, we may wonder whether we should conclude that being in an unhappy marriage necessarily leads to infidelity. The novels tell a certain story, but they do not attach any modal value to what they are saying. How is a reader to know?

A second angle from which to approach Stolnitz's worry concerns a distinction some/all: if a tragic hero in a Greek story falls a victim of his tragic luck, does it mean that all people/some people/one person can experience the same reversal of fortune? If Emma Bovary has no other solution for her unhappiness but to pursue sexual relations with other men and purchase expensive commodities, does it mean that this is true of all unhappily married women? Here we are asking not only about the normative power of truths deduced from literature, but about their applicability. The experience shows that not all unhappily married women engage in adultery and not all people fall victim to bad luck. So if truths deduced from literature do not apply to everyone and are not universal, whom do they apply to? More significantly, how can they be truths, when truths are, by definition, universal and objective?

One way to solve this problem is to claim that literary works offer hypotheses, rather than truths. On this view, the claim, potentially extracted from *Madam Bovary*, that an unhappily married woman will engage in adultery, is a hypothesis about what a woman in a situation similar to Emma's might do, not a statement specifying what she will necessarily do. The cognitive value is here tied to the way reader implements this hypothesis into her cognitive repertoire which she uses

to make sense of human behaviour. Knowing what sorts of behaviour are available expands one's repertoire of reactions to the world. Understanding why people act in certain ways enables one to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible human behaviour. Here again the cognitive gain is not cashed out propositionally, but rests in literature's showing possible reactions. Rather than focusing on the statement which might be deducted from the work (such as Stolnitz's example "His *hybris* must destroy/may destroy a great man in history [some great men?][all great men?] who...") with the aim of finding the referent for it, cognitive gain is in considering how a certain 'lesson' can inform our thought processes on our available options. Tzachi Zamir's reading of *King Lear* offers illuminative example:

Voices such as Edgar's and Cordelia's demonstrate the possibility of forgiving a parent as well as the incapacity to tell the parent that he is loved. Voices such as Racine's Hyppolytus exhibit the way kindness to a parent can be ultimately destructive. All of these are valuable as constituents of thought regarding filial obligation. All should interplay and constitute rational moral thinking about relating to a parent. None should simply be followed. (Zamir 2006: 41–2).

There is a more straightforward answer to the challenge of normativity and applicability. Stolnitz wants to say that, because we don't know, and can't determine, whether *hybris* will strike by necessity, whether it will strike this or that person, we can't accept any claim about *hybris* as a truth. Again by analogy, given that we can't know if an unhappy woman will cheat, and which unhappy woman will cheat, we can't take Emma's adultery as in any way informative on human behaviour. However, such arguments rest on a mistaken view about the type of content found in literature: unlike scientific discourses which deal with natural world that is operated by necessity and causality—a world which can indeed be described by a set of objective, universally valid list of truths—our 'social' world (for the lack of a better word) is not thus subject to regularities. Consequently, it cannot be so neatly described by a list of universally valid statements. Unlike natural sciences, which deal with casual laws, literature deals with the domain of human action and interaction, with their sense-making, interpretation and values. Some women cheat, but not all, some men are goners but some are born under the lucky star. Therefore, some literary works describe Emma and some Isabel Archer, some tell the story of Oedipus and some of Carrie Meeber.

#### 4. *Triviality of literary truths*

The problem of quantification does not exhaust all the problems Stolnitz attributes to literary cognitivism. The next worry he raises is usually referred to as the problem of the 'cognitive familiarity' and it has to do with the fact that literature reveals truths which are already familiar to the readers, or truths which readers could have come to know

through some other means, like their own experience. In commenting Adrian Poole's claim that "Oedipus' fate opens our eyes to the gaps between being and doing and understanding", Stolnitz argues:

Oedipus certainly acted without understanding and came to realize. So have we all, much of the time. It is less certain that those who have read the play (...) had not previously learned this truth, at the cost of their own less dramatic pain. (340)

A shift is made here from claiming that there are no truths available in literature to claiming that what we learn from literature is something we have learnt via other means, namely our own experience. Consequently, literature imparts only cognitively trivial truths. If that is so, then there is nothing particularly valuable in its handling of humanly important issues. However, before we concur with Stolnitz on this, we need to be more precise on what is at stake here. The argument from cognitive familiarity (CF) can imply four different things, which are not always kept apart in discussions. I suggest the following distinctions be made.<sup>18</sup> CF can be understood as a claim that (CFi) readers already know truths presented in literature, or as a claim that (CFii) readers can come to learn truths presented in literature through some other means. In a radical version, the argument can also be read as a claim that (CFiii) truths which we can gain from literature are well known, to the point that they are trivial. Claims (CFi–CFiii) should not be confused with the claim (CFiv) according to which readers need to bring some knowledge (moral, psychological, emotional) into the reading process in order to get cognitive (moral, psychological, emotional) gain after reading.

Many literary cognitivists accept (CFiv). Rather than claiming that the 'lesson' to be learnt from the *Crime and Punishment* is the moral truth 'Murder is wrong', readers already need to know that murder is wrong in order to follow the complexities of moral, philosophical and psychological situation described by Dostoyevsky. Bringing the knowledge of this principle to the novel enables a reader to engage with Ras-kolnikov's reflections on the morality of crime and psychological impact of the knowledge that one has committed it, and consequently, to reach a state of deepened understanding of the phenomena described by Dostoyevsky. It is because works have this kind of effect on the readers that it makes sense to claim that there are indirect cognitive benefits available from reading. Summarizing (and criticizing) the arguments of those who accept this idea, Peter Lamarque refers to it as the cognitive strengthening: "Again the emphasis is away from the acquisition of newly found wordly truths towards 'clarificationism' (Noel Carroll), or an 'enriched understanding' (Gordon Graham) or an 'acknowledgment' (John Gibson) of beliefs readers are likely to hold already" (Lamarque 2010: 381). On Carroll's view, and similarly with respect to Graham, literary works can clarify what is involved in the moral principles, thus

<sup>18</sup> I provided a more detailed account in my 2014.

enabling readers to gain a fuller understanding of these principles, and consequently, to become more sensible towards the ethical demands. Gibson relies on Stanley Cavell's notion of acknowledgment and argues that distinctive payoffs of literary works lie in their ability to reveal to us requirements that our knowledge makes on us. Knowing something is not enough, Gibson claims, if one doesn't understand what this knowledge demands of one. I agree with all these versions of cognitive strengthening but I will not go into more details here. Suffice to say that the argument from triviality is surpassed: there is a cognitive gain that depends on things readers already know.<sup>19</sup> Such a gain is not trivial, since readers do come to deepen their knowledge and understanding of notions and principles they are already familiar with.<sup>20</sup>

What about Stolnitz's CF argument developed along claims i–iii above? An easy way out of the problem for those who want to save the overall aesthetic value of works that (supposedly) present trivial truths is to claim that the value of a work resides not in new cognitive contributions, i.e. truths, but in the way these truths are developed (see Lamarque 2010: 239). From the point of view of literary aesthetics, this is a welcome solution which saves the value of literature that might have been lost. But from the epistemological point of view, this is not enough. Literary cognitivist wants to show that literature is a cognitively valuable source of knowledge, not cognitively trivial but aesthetically pleasing archive of things we already know. Therefore, we have to refute Stolnitz. We'll start with (CFi): readers already know truths presented in literature.

Certainly it is true that in some cases—perhaps many—what we read in a literary work is known to us. That people commit murders because they are in need of money, that women and men engage in adultery because they are unhappy and dissatisfied with their partners or are simply bored and in need of excitement, that abortion was not always legal in America—these truths we know without reading *Crime and Punishment*, *Madam Bovary* and *An American Tragedy*, respectively. But to presuppose, as Stolnitz does, that such bare truth is all that we get from these works is a seriously impoverished way

<sup>19</sup> One way in which to bolster the cognitive strengthening line of defence is provided by those who defend the analogy between literature and thought experiment. As David Davies explains „the mental models through which readers comprehend fictional narratives also provide, through their mobilization of tacit or unarticulated knowledge of the world, a means of testing those claims to knowledge of the actual world that theorists have located in fictional narratives, and thereby validate the idea that fiction can be a genuine source of knowledge of the world” (Davies 2007: 44).

<sup>20</sup> A much stronger claim for the value of cognitive strengthening can be made if one relies on the recent developments in epistemology concerning the plurality view of epistemic aims and values. Wayne Riggs (2008) and Jonathan Kvanvig (2005) are some of the authors who developed accounts of understanding, and Linda Zagzebski (2001) and Catherine Elgin (1996) have both wrote on the connection between literature and understanding. I offer one such account in Vidmar (2013).

to think about their overall cognitive value. *Crime and Punishment* offers more than simple statements regarding the wrongness of murder. Many critics read it as a philosophical analysis of the principle of consequentialism and utilitarianism, as a psychological analysis of the impact of guilt and passivity upon an individual, as a sociological study of the poverty and alcoholism that were so widely spread in the city in that period.<sup>21</sup> At one level, there are various philosophical, psychological and sociological truths available in this novel and it makes no sense to suppose that readers know all of them before they begin to read. On the other hand, development of the story along these lines can contribute substantially to how reader thinks about justifiability of murder. A reader might come to realize that she would act in the same way in those circumstances, or she might conclude that the principle 'Do not kill' applies universally and is not liable to consequentialist's treatment. While it cannot be predicted what someone will get out of the work, there are important cognitive gains available, ranging from self knowledge to a deepened understanding of the moral principle.

To claim that literature presents only those things that readers already know seriously undermines some of the intentions authors might have had in presenting the story in a particular way. It is a well documented fact that Dreiser was passionately interested in human sexuality and was eager to understand social forces related to distribution of wealth (see Eby 2005). All of his novels are, thematically, about these issues. Committed to realism, he was particularly attentive to objectively and non-selectively depicting and portraying aspects of social reality. For the sake of argument, let us agree with the claim that his contemporaries were familiar with all the things he was writing about:<sup>22</sup> development and operation of big factories, entertainment industry, art scene and finances etc. Does it mean that therefore his works lack cognitive value? Certainly not, primarily because his intention was not to tell them what they already know but to challenge them to reconsider social and psychological forces that went into creating the reality he was describing. For all of his realism, Dreiser persistently used his literary works as an epistemological tool for probing the conditions of humans. Take the abortion episode from *An American Tragedy*: Dreiser is reporting what the readers (his contemporaries) knew—abortion is illegal—but he is relying on this knowledge in order, first, to theoretically discuss human sexuality, and second, to critically examine social circumstances involved in condemnation of abortion. Carefully addressing the issue of sexuality, he is examining the power of sexual urges in humans. By exposing society's attitudes toward pregnancies outside of marriage, he is criticizing the fact that the moral judgment regarding the 'sinful' as opposed to 'forgiveness-worthy' is de-

<sup>21</sup> For the interpretation along these lines see Dilman (1968), Ivanits (2008).

<sup>22</sup> But note that for readers who are not his contemporaries, his books offer a historical window into the development of great American cities.

terminated by one's social status, rather than by some intrinsic features of the sexual deed itself. Given their poor background, Clyde and Roberta are two sinners who committed a "dreadful crime". On the other hand, "unfortunate" girls from rich families deserve to be rescued and resolved of their 'mistakes', not 'crimes'. Thus, "the real sex crime that Dreiser exposes in *An American Tragedy* is the national criminalization of sexuality" (Eby 2005: 582). By depicting the familiar situation, Dreiser criticizes the society and its hypocrisy, evident in the way it tries to control and sanction biological impulses: Roberta's shame and guilt caused by her (physical) desire for Clyde is the voice of society and upbringing; the inability to suppress these desires is the biological force which ultimately takes over.

The slave narratives and colonial literature are other interesting examples of literary works which depict phenomena that are common knowledge, but offer a wider, more personal perspectives into these matters. *A Passage to India*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Beloved* and many other works depict issues of race, racism and racial superiority and present it from the experiential perspective of those who were directly involved in these processes. Unlike historical accounts which give factual descriptions of how these processes were conducted, literary works reveal subjective experience and challenge the underlying assumptions that scientific accounts do not raise.

Moving on to (CFii): readers can come to learn truths presented in literature through some other means, such as personal experience, testimony or science and therefore, literature is not in any special way cognitively valuable. However, many, if not most, of the things we know are easily available through some other means. If I know there's no milk in the fridge, I could have come to that truth through perception (I opened the fridge and saw there's no milk), through testimony (my sister told me), through memory (I remember using the last bottle of milk), through deduction (I remember buying milk five days ago and that's how long it takes me to use one bottle) etc. That however doesn't mean the truth about not having milk is any less valuable. For my perspective here—epistemological—the fact that literature is not the sole source of truths does not mean that its cognitive value is diminished.

Replies to (CFi) and (CFii) should by now make it clear that (CFii), the most radical reading of the argument from cognitive familiarity according to which truths which we can gain from literature are well known, to the point that they are trivial, is also to be dismissed along the same lines as (CFi). Literature is cognitively valuable and the cognitive benefits it delivers are many, important, and quite possibly in some cases at least, not easily obtainable through other means. For the (CFiii) to have any power, Stolnitz would have to show that everything that can be known through literary works is already known by all the potential readers. He would also have to show that no value is derived from depicting that which is known. I doubt such an argument would be convincing.

### 5. *Literature as a social practice*

Stolnitz's final list of arguments aims at undermining epistemic reliability of literature as a practice. When it comes to literature, he argues, there are no established ways of spotting mistakes, solving contradictions and confirming truths. The underlying structure of literature does not correspond to that of our established cognitive practices. In science and religion, his go-to examples of such practices, truths are supported, mistakes eliminated and contradictions resolved, by the underlying body of evidence.<sup>23</sup> No such mechanisms exist in art: "Art, uniquely, never confirms its truths" (340) Stolnitz claims, adding "The fiction does not and cannot provide the evidence" (340). In addition, even if art reveals truth—such as that "Estate litigation in the Court of Chancery in mid-nineteenth England moved very slowly" (340) from Dickens' novel—"the truth was knowable before the fictions appeared" (341).

At stake here is the fact that literature seems exempt from epistemic norms definitive of informative discourses.<sup>24</sup> Literary works deliver contradictory views—look no further than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*—and contain factual mistakes that go uncorrected, such as mesmerism in Bronte sisters and physiognomy in Dickens. However, such factual mistakes do not deter readers from these works, nor diminish their value. Today we know that physiognomy is wrong, but we nevertheless enjoy Dickens' novels. But for literature to be cognitively valuable, argues Stolnitz, either should such mistakes be corrected, or value of such works annihilated. Given that this is not the practice, as we neither allow intrusions into literary works nor deny them their value, we should give up advocating cognitive value of literature altogether.

All things considered, Stolnitz makes a good point in preaching caution: art and literature do not satisfy epistemic conditions of reliability we presuppose in and demand of science and other discourses imbued with cognitive potential. To overcome this problem, we first need to show that mistakes and contradictions found in literature do not undermine its claims to cognitive value. Elsewhere I have provided one such account and here I can only briefly repeat my conclusions (Vidmar 2012a). My main point was that not all mistakes found in literature result from ignorance or deliberate intention on the part of the author to deceive or convey falsehood—factors, in other words, that count against one's reliability. Some mistakes, such as those resulting from an author's reliance on physiognomy, were, at the time the work was written, not mistaken, but scientifically accepted theories about human nature. If anything, such cases prove the extent to which literary authors rely on scientific theories in their works, presupposing that these are true given that they are accepted by the scientific community. In such cases,

<sup>23</sup> It is questionable to which extent it is acceptable to talk of truth and lack of contradictions in religion. But to make the argument plausible, suffice to say that there are authorities, such as the Pope, who can solve contradictions.

<sup>24</sup> See Stein Haugom Olsen (1978) for a discussion of informative discourses.



mistakes are the result of a background beliefs that the authors rely upon, beliefs that were, at the time of writing, accepted scientific truths about how things are. Such mistakes are epistemically important in the sense that they testify to how things were once conceived. Literature thus testifies to the progression and accumulation of the overall human knowledge. It is progressive and it accumulates knowledge from various disciplines. It reflects views and perspectives of the society. Therefore, as the scientific, religious, psychological, sociological, philosophical etc. views progress and modify, so does the way these are incorporated into literature. That is why there are mistakes, as well as contradictory views, in literature. They do not diminish the value of a work (neither cognitive nor literary) because there are other elements that bear upon work's cognitive impact and artistic value, elements which are not operative in scientific discourse. While scientific works become obsolete if the theories are wrong, literary works hold our attention because of the way the theme is developed, because of their formal features, emotional impact, aesthetic appeal and other artistic reasons. Very often, mistakes do not render works cognitively impotent. The fact that Ibsen develops the story of *Ghosts* on a scientifically mistaken account of syphilis (Olsen's example) does not render his psychological portrayal of dysfunctional family and broken family ties any less illuminating. Indirect cognitive benefits are still available, even if facts are wrong.

My account so far explains why sometimes mistakes are in literature, but Stolnitz's claim regarding the lack of epistemic principles is still on the table. However, his criticism is too strong. Even if the practice of literature does not rest on established methods of spotting mistakes and correcting them, it is not so that 'anything goes.' Recall that I have in mind an active, reflective reader whose knowledge of the world and literature is sufficient to provide a sort of a safety net. His experience enables him to differentiate between authors who present reliable accounts in their works and those who do not. One important element that readers rely on is familiarity with the demands of different genres. Depending on the genre in which they write, literary authors are to various degrees concerned with objective portrayal of reality, and when it comes to those genres in which aesthetic norms demand that they turn away from reality, readers do not expect these works to represent reality. It would be implausible to talk about mistakes in science fiction novels, even if it is perfectly acceptable to evaluate one's vision, say futuristic, with the state of affairs a novel describes.<sup>25</sup> Here again the analogy with testimony is informative: an evaluation of the reliability of a literary author is similar to the evaluation of our everyday informants, with the additional element of knowledge of the conventions of literary genres and an awareness (even superficial) of the literary techniques that might be used to support artistic aims.

<sup>25</sup> For an example of how to evaluate a science fiction writer with respect to the correctness of his portrayal, see Vidmar and Swirski (2014).

A further worry that Stolnitz raises is the fact that truths were knowable before they appeared in a certain work. This implies that they do not gain their authority in the same way as scientific truths do: many, perhaps all, scientific truths were not known until they appeared in scientific work. This is not so with literature. However, even if literature does not generate truths in the same way as science does (i.e. being part of a fictional discourse does not give them authority, whereas being a part of scientific discourse does), that doesn't mean that the value and validity of such truths is lost. Literature is still a valuable source of truths even if it doesn't discover them, but only delivers them. While it is true that Dickens' readers knew that legal system of their time was slow, just like Dreiser's readers were familiar with development of factories, for us, today, these works give us new, unknown information about social, political, economic and other circumstances dominant at the time these works were written. As evident from my reply to instances of CF argument, literature doesn't have to be dedicated to discovering truths in a way that science is to be cognitively valuable.

Finally, Stolnitz reverberates some of the concerns raised by Plato regarding the epistemic authority of authors. As he claims, truths derived from art "do not require specialists" (342). I take this to be the most pressing issue. How to account for the incredibly sharp insight into human psychology that imbues Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Austen, Dostoyevsky and various others literary classics? Most of the literary giants wrote their works at incredibly young age, and not all of them had a first class education. What made them so great at capturing the world in all of its complexities? I doubt we can find any theoretical answer to this, and it might be so that we need a case by case study. To many, observation was crucial. Dostoyevsky claimed it was the years he spent in Siberian prison that made him sensitive to the nuances of human psychology. Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Leo Tolstoy and many other realists were relying on empirical methods of observation and description. Writers were often a part of wider group of intellectuals, all of which were devoted to pursuing different kinds of knowledge; arguably, they relied on others for insights into different areas of research and used that knowledge in their works. In modern days, writers do research and consult experts, as often revealed in their interviews. Whether that suffices to answer Stolnitz I do not know, but I am not sure if epistemology can offer anything better.

One final observation: in his haste to expel literature from the domain of informative practices, due to its apparent inability to hold hands with the sciences, Stolnitz does not consider the possibility that literature would fare much better if compared to a different set of cognitively valuable practices: the humanities. Many of his arguments against taking literature cognitively seriously apply to philosophy. Philosophy too contains contradictions, as when Kant clashes his theory of causality against Hume's, and mistakes, as when Descartes explains

human emotional experience via the notion of animal spirits. Occasionally, it is questionable which truths are philosophical and how to determine them, as philosophy lacks a universally accepted method and shares its concerns with sciences and the humanities. Nevertheless, we repeatedly recognize it as cognitively valuable. Furthermore, literature and philosophy are in the same manner concerned with humanly important issues, and with challenging what is known and familiar. Stressing the similarities literature shares with philosophy is important for the overall assessment of its cognitive value.

## 6. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to provide an epistemological account of the cognitive value of literature that can mitigate, if not fight off, Stolnitz's arguments. While it is my impression that Stolnitz challenges literature on an overly simplified assumption about the veritistic nature of sciences, my aim here was to show that his challenges can be met. Literature does not satisfy scientific criteria of discovering truth, but these are not the only criteria relevant for knowledge and learning and neither is scientific way the only way in which we can gain knowledge. Divorcing literature from the norms of science does not imply divorcing it from norms of epistemic reliability or making it incapable of delivering knowledge and being cognitively valuable. Confirmation of the truths extracted from literature comes from life and experience. The great works of art that give incentive to our cognitive pursuits may be unrelated but to the extent that they are concerned with human situation in the world and humanly important issues, they form a corpus of different ways of being human and acting (in)humanly, in the widest sense possible. Formal contradictions are tolerated not because literature is above the norms of epistemic reliability but because it reflects advances in ideas and conceptions and their diversity. There are no easy, straightforward answers to questions that literature raises, because there are no easy and simple answers to questions that concern humanity itself. Finally, there is more to our cognitive economy than having true propositions and literary works offer potential for genuine advance in one's conceptual framework. Understanding other people's experiences, having an awareness of what it feels like to be in a certain situation, having one's views challenged and getting the opportunity for a reflection, re-examination and re-evaluation of one's body of beliefs matters significantly for how we are as epistemic agents. None of these benefits is available on Stolnitz's over-simplistic account of what comprises cognitive value.<sup>26</sup>

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