

## On the Cognitive Value of Modernist Narratives

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### 1. Introduction

The cognitive value of literature—whether literary works can contribute to our understanding of ourselves and reality—is one of the perennial problems in philosophical aesthetics and key questions in analytic philosophy of art. In addition, empirical psychology has recently become interested in the question, and partly because of the rise of cognitive scientific approaches in the humanities, the question has also returned to literary studies.

When studying literature's ability to enlarge our understanding, the focus has traditionally been on the works' mimetic dimension: literary works are taken to offer us experiential knowledge: knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation or to see the world from a certain point (or points) of view, for instance. Of recent, it has been fashionable in philosophy, psychology and cognitive literary studies to approach the cognitive value of literature in terms of the theory of mind. It is proposed that reading fictional literature is about inferring fictional states of minds and, further, that this activity could improve readers' ability to understand the mental states of others and, perhaps, workings of the human mind at large.

Conversely, many have argued that literary minds are qualitatively different from real human minds and the mimetic way of reading literary works does great aesthetic violence to them. Moreover, analytic philosophy of art—which has explored the topic for over a half a century—has investigated the cognitive gains of art typically in terms of, or derived from, truth and resemblance, favouring examples drawn from realist literature. Such an approach seems problematic in modernism where an author ponders, '[W]hat is reality? And who are the judges of reality?'<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, modernist fiction is characteristically 'epistemological', as Brian McHale famously describes it. McHale argues that modernist fictions foreground questions, such as 'What is

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf 1996, p. 31

there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?’<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, Alan Palmer thinks that modernist works are ‘oriented toward the investigation of such issues as perception and cognition, perspective, the subjective experience of time, and the circulation and reliability of knowledge’<sup>3</sup>. David Herman, too, maintains that modernist narratives illuminate ‘the degree to which perceiving, acting, and thinking are inextricably interlinked, with the constant cross-circulation among these activities accounting for intelligent agents’ enactment of a world’<sup>4</sup>. Precisely the moderns’ interest on these fundamental issues, together with the philosophical and psychological erudition of many modernist authors, makes it tempting to approach certain modernist narratives as literary-philosophical explorations.

This essay examines the assumed cognitive value of modernist narratives from a philosophical point of view. In particular, I am interested if we can learn about the workings of the mind in reading modernist narratives. If not, could modernist narratives contribute to cognition some other way?

## 2. Modernism and the mind

Narratology has long celebrated third-person narrators for their ability to give us access to fictional characters’ minds. ‘Epic fiction is the sole epistemological instance where ... subjectivity ... of a third-person *qua* third-person can be portrayed’, Käte Hamburger proposed in the 1950s<sup>5</sup>. Later, Dorrit Cohn spoke of third-person narrators’ ‘unnatural power to see into their characters’ inner lives’<sup>6</sup>, and Marie-Laure Ryan of narrators’ ‘supernatural ability of reading into foreign minds’<sup>7</sup>. Correspondingly, Monika Fludernik states that ‘fiction at one point discovers that it ... can present consciousness extensively as if reading people’s minds’<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> McHale 1987, 9; emphasis in original

<sup>3</sup> Palmer 2011, p. 276

<sup>4</sup> Herman 2011, p. 264

<sup>5</sup> Hamburger 1973, p. 83; emphasis removed; Hamburger 1968, p. 73

<sup>6</sup> Cohn 1999, p. 106

<sup>7</sup> Ryan 1991, p. 67

<sup>8</sup> Fludernik 1996, p. 48

The epistemic accessibility of fictional minds has later become a subject of dispute in narrative theory, but the idea of the resemblance between real and literary minds and the reader's ability to enter a character's mind lives strong in cognitive literary studies, for instance. The idea that we interpret literary minds akin to how we interpret other people in our everyday encounters is a standard assumption in cognitive approaches to literature. Theory of mind, a psychological concept describing our comprehension of others' minds, has been particularly influential in explaining our engagement with literary narratives; the critic Lisa Zunshine claims that 'ToM makes literature as we know it possible'<sup>9</sup>, whereas the philosopher Gregory Currie proposes that mentalising (a term he prefers over ToM), the understanding of mental states and the capacity to reason about them, lies in the core of literary interpretation<sup>10</sup>. Alan Palmer, in turn, thinks that 'in essence, narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning'<sup>11</sup>. He claims that '[o]ne of the pleasures of reading novels is the enjoyment of being told what a variety of fictional people are thinking. ... This is a relief from the business of real life, much of which requires the ability to decode accurately the behavior of others.'<sup>12</sup> Later, Palmer has emphasised the externalist perspective to the mind, yet maintaining that 'readers enter storyworlds primarily by attempting to follow the workings of the fictional minds contained in them'<sup>13</sup>.

It is a commonplace that modernist narratives deal with 'inner experience' and the 'representation of the mind'. Palmer, for instance, claims that 'the modernist novel is still based on a belief in truth and reality' and that modernist authors 'attempt to record as faithfully as possible the workings of fictional minds'<sup>14</sup>. David Herman questions the idea of the *inward turn* in modernism, but asserts that modernist narratives characteristically deal with the representation of the mind:

'[T]he upshot of modernist experimentation was not to plumb psychological depths, but to spread the mind abroad – to suggest that human psychology has the profile it does because of the extent to which it is interwoven with worldly circumstances. The

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<sup>9</sup> Zunshine 2003, p. 5. In addition to competing models of ToM (theory-theory and simulation theory), it is disputed whether interpersonal understanding requires ToM at all.

<sup>10</sup> See Currie 2016

<sup>11</sup> Palmer 2004, p. 12

<sup>12</sup> Palmer 2004, p. 10. Palmer (ibid., 246) remarks that much of our knowledge about fictional minds are hypotheses and conjectures which we base on the characters' actions.

<sup>13</sup> Palmer 2010, p. 9. Palmer does not claim that fictional minds are identical to real minds; rather, he thinks that fictional minds are semiotic constructs that are similar to real minds (ibid., p. 19).

<sup>14</sup> Palmer 2011, p. 275

mind does not reside within; instead, it emerges through humans' dynamic interdependencies with the social and material environments they seek to navigate.'<sup>15</sup>

Sure enough, modernist literature was greatly affected by developments in psychology, such as Ernst Mach's theory of subjective experience, William James's view of the stream of thought or consciousness, Henri Bergson's view of immediate experience, Sigmund Freud's idea of the unconsciousness, and so on<sup>16</sup>. Many underline that modern psychology and the modernist movement in literature were intertwined<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, psychological theories were not only an inspiration for authors, but for many writers, the exploration of human experience was a programmatic pursuit. In her essay 'Modern Fiction' (1925), Virginia Woolf proposes how writers could come 'closer to life':

'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.'<sup>18</sup>

In a passage cited *ad nauseam*, and repeated now again, Woolf proposes:

'Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors

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<sup>15</sup> Herman 2011, pp. 253–254.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Gang (2013, p. 117) aptly remarks that '[m]odernism was not psychologically monolithic; instead, an array of psychological theories—including behaviorism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis—circulated simultaneously and competed against each other'.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Meisel 2007, esp. ch 4. Virginia Woolf's interests in theories of knowledge and language are also well known. For the connections between her literary work and philosophical theories of her time, see e.g. Hintikka 1979; Banfield 2000; and Quigley 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf 2008, p. 8.

would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.’<sup>19</sup>

Referring to Woolf’s program, one could defend the mimetic approach to modernism and claim that modernism considered itself truer to life and reflected people’s experience with their environment: it was the world, or the human character, that had changed. Eric Auerbach, for one, praised Woolf for her talent in capturing the modern epoch<sup>20</sup>. He admires Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* precisely for its lifelikeness and acuity:

‘[W]hat realistic depth is achieved in every individual occurrence, for example the measuring of the stocking! Aspects of the occurrence come to the fore, and links to other occurrences, which, before this time, had hardly been sensed, which had never been clearly seen and attended to, and yet they are determining factors in our real lives.’<sup>21</sup>

There is plenty of genetic evidence available for one who argues that the moderns aimed to give their readers an insight into the human mind. Virginia Woolf says that in *Mrs. Dalloway* she intended to ‘adumbrate ... a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side—something like that.’<sup>22</sup> Many think she succeeded. One critic says that in the work Woolf gives us a ‘convincing portrait of schizophrenic breakdown’<sup>23</sup>, whereas another proposes that *Mrs Dalloway*’s passages on Septimus Smith ‘allow the reader to experience thoughts, psychological problems, and mental illnesses he or she *does not*

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<sup>19</sup> Woolf 2008, p. 9. According to Woolf, modern writers’ interest ‘lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors.’ (ibid., p. 11)

<sup>20</sup> The assumed cognitive value of modernist narratives ought not to be limited to their ability to reveal individual minds. Modernist narratives illuminate a cultural understanding of the world, as Auerbach remarks in his chapter on Woolf; a related view is to look at Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* reflecting the scientific understanding of his time, a worldview affected by psychoanalysis and quantum physics, for instance.

<sup>21</sup> Auerbach 1953, p. 552

<sup>22</sup> Woolf 1978, p. 207

<sup>23</sup> Suzette Henke, cited from Alber 2011, p. 221

*normally have access to*<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, many think that fictional narratives do not only have cognitive value but an advantage. Monika Fludernik asserts that fiction ‘provides readers with experiences that they cannot have on their own—and this constitutes the fascination of all narratives’; as an example, she tells us how ‘in the wake of the interior monologue ... it has become quite fashionable to present the moment of a protagonist’s death through his/her mind’<sup>25</sup>. In addition to depicting particular minds, it is repeatedly said that modernist narratives are particularly well suited in illuminating different ways to conceive the world. In such a view, the modernist novel is thought as an epistemological lesson in subjectivism, skepticism, or relativism.

Looking for minds in literature is not an odd enterprise. We spontaneously look for intentional mindful agency in all sorts of actions and representations. Further, many authors definitely put great effort in the psychological interest (or plausibility, if you like) of their works. Then again, we are eager to see minds and persons everywhere. We attribute (inappropriate) human-like intentions (desires) to non-human animals, such as dogs and birds, and (more or less playfully) even to plants (a stubborn tree). How about minds in literature?

We will run into difficult epistemological problems if we limit ourselves to the mimetic approach. There is a long way from literary experience to actual knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation, for example<sup>26</sup>. Of course literary works may make great insights into human mind, but then again, a depiction may be impressive and convincing and yet erraneous or misguided (if assessed for its truth). Perhaps Mrs. Woolf is not a real expert of schizophrenia, or any other sort of mental disorder. Moreover, that we gain a feeling of a real experience in reading a work of fiction ought not to make us reduce literary interpretation to human psychological models. Literary narratives operate both on real-world and literary ‘parameters’ and have both a ‘mimetic’ and a ‘poetic’ dimension: they have a humanly interesting content (the mimetic dimension) which they give an artistic rendering (the poetic dimension)<sup>27</sup>. And it is the poetic dimension which sets certain reservations for the

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<sup>24</sup> Alber 2011, p. 220; emphasis added

<sup>25</sup> Fludernik 2003, p. 256

<sup>26</sup> For extensive criticism of the idea that we could gain experiential knowledge from fiction, see Lamarque and Olsen (1994, pp. 370–386).

<sup>27</sup> See Lamarque & Olsen 1994, pp. 261–265.

cognitivist approach<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. The external perspective

In the philosophy of literature, a distinction is regularly drawn between our two fundamental ways of thinking and speaking of fictional works. Kendall Walton says that ‘players of games of make-believe’—which includes readers of fiction—both *participate* in the fictions (make-believe, imagination, immersion, transportation) and *observe* them, that is, look at the properties that generate the imaginings<sup>29</sup>. For him, this ‘dual standpoint’ is ‘one of the most fundamental and important features of the human institution of fiction’<sup>30</sup>. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen also distinguish between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ perspectives to fictions. From the internal perspective, they say, we project ourselves into the ‘world’ of the work and reflect the characters as *persons*; from the external perspective, in turn, we identify the *fictional characters* and acknowledge their artificiality<sup>31</sup>. In actual literary experience, we assumedly employ the both perspectives and shift our focus between them without much noticing it. Also, one might expect that the intensity of imagining or the extent of ‘external considerations’ is both genre- and reader-relative. Still, the distinction is crucial for our understanding of fiction. The perspectives regulate, for instance, the criteria we apply to the characters: from the internal point of view, fictional characters may be ‘arrogant’ or ‘mean’, just like real people, whereas from the external perspective they have literary-critical properties such as ‘being stereotypical’, ‘symbolizing the futility of life’, and so on<sup>32</sup>.

Lamarque claims that

‘Although from an internal perspective characters often act and live their lives according to ordinary principles of choice and cause, when viewed, externally, as artefacts in a work of art they become subject to radically different kinds of

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<sup>28</sup> By ‘cognitivism’ I mean the philosophical view which holds that artworks may provide their audiences significant knowledge and insight concerning matters of human interest. The position should not be confused with cognitive scientific study of literature.

<sup>29</sup> Walton 1990, pp. 49–50

<sup>30</sup> Walton 1978, p. 21

<sup>31</sup> Lamarque and Olsen 1994, p. 145. Lamarque and Olsen (*ibid.*, 144) also emphasize the value of the dual standpoint, claiming that ‘[b]eing “caught up” in fictional worlds and at the same time recognizing their fictionality involves a delicate balance—even a tension—which certainly accounts for much of the pleasure and value of imaginative works of art’.

<sup>32</sup> Lamarque & Olsen 1994, p. 146

explanation. Why do they act as they do? Perhaps because they *must* act that way to meet aesthetic, structural and genre-based demands for works of that kind. Perhaps their actions have a symbolic function or a function connected with the development of a theme or because they represent a “polarity” with another character.’<sup>33</sup>

The idea is not limited to that an artistic genre determines the ‘logic’ or ‘rationality’ of the story; rather, it is that the content of a literary work is essentially tied to its texture<sup>34</sup>. How do we distinguish between individual minds in literature? Not all cognitive activity is verbal, and we should ask, for instance, whether the narrator depicts thoughts that the character has verbalized herself or whether the narrator verbalizes the character’s perceptions and feelings. And how sincere, or subjective the narrator is? Characteristic for literature is that these questions often remain open. Moreover, it is fascinating to sense discrepancy between the narrator and a character, for instance<sup>35</sup>. Dorrit Cohn, for one, remarks that authors like Woolf are ‘for some reason unwilling to entrust the presentation of the inner life to the character’s own verbal competence’; instead, in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* we find searches ‘through complicated landscapes of the mind, syntactically too complex to be attributed to inner speech’<sup>36</sup>. In like manner Lanier Anderson thinks that ‘the idiom of Woolf’s depiction of Clarissa is elevated—*so* exalted, in fact, that it can occasionally seem unwarranted by the underlying thoughts over which its words are poured’<sup>37</sup>.

Further, Anderson illustrates how Woolf’s artistic representation transcends our normal cognitive parameters by making dynamic links between the consciousnesses of the characters:

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<sup>33</sup> Lamarque 2014, ix; emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> When drawing, say, a philosophically interesting setting or insight from fiction, one is led to ask its worldly extension. Lamarque and Olsen (1994, p. 454) maintain that abstract ideas in literature are based on the narrator’s perspectival descriptions and essentially connected with the fictional particulars, so that transferring the ideas to another (nonliterary) context trivializes them.

<sup>35</sup> Maria Mäkelä (2013), for one, argues that literary narratives do not reveal their characters’ minds but rather, foreground and thematize the telling and hide the underlying experience. In her view, literature is characteristically ambiguous, seemingly objective descriptions turn out to be subjective, and the origin of a thought always remains vague.

<sup>36</sup> Cohn 1978, p. 44. Representation is, of course, tied to artistic conventions. As Cohn puts it, ‘[t]he monologues of *Ulysses* may be regarded as a particularly clear instances of the historical dimension of realism Roman Jakobson defined in his essay ‘On Realism in Art’: the revolutionary artist deforms the existing artistic canons for the sake of closer imitation of reality; the conservative public misunderstands the deformation of the canon as a distortion of reality. The first generation of *Ulysses* readers, conditioned by a long tradition of monologues modeled on dialogues, could only have experienced Bloom’s and Stephen’s mental productions as radical departures from realistic representation. ... Today’s reader is more likely than his grandparents to take Joyce’s conception of verbal thought for granted, to accept the notion that it differs from communicative speech in a number of significant respects, and to accept the monologues of *Ulysses* as supremely convincing achievements of formal mimeticism.’ (ibid., pp. 92–93)

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, ms.

‘Whereas Zunshine highlights a (relatively familiar) phenomenon of “vertical” integration of mental attitudes that are *about* others’ attitudes, and thus take those further attitudes as objects to form a nested hierarchy representing the social situation (form: Richard sees that Lady Bruton knows that Miss Brush thinks that Hugh’s beliefs about the sentiments of the *Times* editors are bunkum), by contrast, what is demanded in the jaunt around London is a facility for navigating “horizontal” connections joining the thoughts of one person to those of another so as to permit the smooth flow of consciousness across different minds. Such horizontal connections are unfamiliar from everyday life. After all, the possibility of consciously transitioning from one person’s thought to another’s *in real life* (as opposed to in the fictional world) would seem to depend on the truth of something like Clarissa’s implausible thesis that consciousness can extend from one mind into another, flowing across the juncture created by common attention.’<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Anderson remarks that ‘horizontal mental linkage is not a feature of ordinary social existence, so its mastery will not build up our socially useful “Machiavellian intelligence” (as evolutionary psychologists sometimes dub the capacity Zunshine highlights)’<sup>39</sup>. This leads us to a further point, namely, that literary minds are products of textual artifice and appreciated partly for their artificiality. Lamarque asserts that

‘The whole modernist movement in art amounted to a challenge at a fundamental level to the idea of representing reality. At its best modernism exhibited the plurality of worlds, private and public, in contrast to some single “objective” world given in experience. Once representation itself had been exposed as a kind of artifice it was natural for artists to highlight the artifice of their own media.’<sup>40</sup>

If we abandon the mimetic approach to literary cognition, is there anything left? Could literary narratives enhance cognition after our acknowledging their artificiality and the dissimilarities between real-world and literary experiences? Is there value in literary narratives deviating from the natural norms?

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<sup>38</sup> Anderson, ms.; emphasis in original

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, ms.; emphasis in original

<sup>40</sup> Lamarque 2014, p. 38

#### 4. Cognitive enrichment, imaginative flexibility?

In arguing for the value of stories in constructing reality, the psychologist Jerome Bruner proposes that

‘The innovative storyteller ... may go beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed, in a way they had never before “noticed” or even dreamed. The shift from Hesiod to Homer, the advent of “inner adventure” in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, the advent of Flaubert’s perspectivalism, or Joyce’s epiphanizing of banalities—these are all innovations that probably shaped our narrative versions of everyday reality as well as changed the course of literary history, the two perhaps being not that different.’<sup>41</sup>

The view that literary narratives could enrich our cognitive frames or scripts has become popular in cognitive narratology. Fludernik, for one, maintains that through repeated use, ‘non-natural narrational frames’ become ‘naturalized’: second person narration or a dying person’s interior monologue, for example, have lost their ‘surprise factor’ and become ‘natural frames’, part of our cognitive stock<sup>42</sup>. Some think that the new frames that literary works have on offer do not limit to literary interpretation but may be valuable for our thought in general. Jan Alber, for instance, claims that ‘one should study literary fiction because it allows us to transcend ourselves and to experience scenarios and situations which are strictly speaking impossible in the real world’<sup>43</sup>. Of Alber’s particular interest are ‘unnatural’ scenarios and events, which ‘significantly widen the cognitive horizon of human awareness; they challenge our limited perspective on the world and invite us to address questions that we do not normally address’<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Bruner 1991, p. 12

<sup>42</sup> See Fludernik 2003, p. 256. Fludernik (1996, p. 172) claims that ‘[b]y the time of Joyce’s and Woolf’s depiction of minds in their plenitude, these authors could build on cognitive parameters which were well in place and available for use: readers had considerable training in tuning in on such non-natural mind reading within a natural frame’.

<sup>43</sup> Alber 2011, p. 211

<sup>44</sup> Alber 2011, p. 227. ‘Unnatural’ may be taken to include so-called ‘omniscient narrators’ and other elements that are present in all sort of ‘realist’ narratives too.

Alber maintains that literary narratives could generate *new* cognitive frames by blending scripts (animals, corpses or inanimate objects as narrators)<sup>45</sup> or they could *enrich* our existing frames by stretching them ‘beyond real-world possibilities until the parameters include the strange phenomena with which we are confronted’<sup>46</sup>. In addition to providing readers new frames and enhancing their existing frames, Alber thinks that the ‘unnatural scenarios of literary fiction are particularly well designed to *make us more open and more flexible* because they urge us to deal with radical forms of otherness or strangeness’<sup>47</sup>. According to him, flexibility of imagination characteristically links to growth in ethical understanding (openness, tolerance).

I am very sympathetic to the view that literary narratives could widen our ‘mental universe’<sup>48</sup> or ‘the cognitive horizon of human awareness’<sup>49</sup>. But I also think that the mere repetition of these ideas leads us in danger of establishing a *religion* of literature. The pompous claims are not proportional to their supporting evidence—no matter how evidence is understood—and at times look even like dogmas. It is unclear if literary works actually produce changes such as those described. While the comprehension of a literary work often requires us to adjust or modify our cognitive apparatus, to ‘blend schemes’, for example, it is not known if the conceptual adjustments required in the interpretation of the work carry over the literary experience and affect the reader’s actual cognitive mechanisms.

The matter is also extremely difficult to study. Yet, *some* evidence for the cognitivist’s claims is needed. How could we have even some support for the assertion of such changes *commonly* taking place as a result of a *literary* response? This is a real worry; the claims are problematic also because they imply that all conceptual changes would automatically be for the good (which they are not)<sup>50</sup>. What if *Mrs. Dalloway* rather distorts our understanding of reality? A professional critic could of course offer her readers a *prescriptive* reading of the work, arguing that the readers would improve their conceptual understanding, would they follow the proposed interpretation. Still, one would expect a suggestion how the matter could be approached and where to look for evidence of the assumed conceptual changes<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Alber 2009, p. 82

<sup>46</sup> Alber 2009, pp. 82–83, 91–93; see also Alber 2011, pp. 222–224

<sup>47</sup> Alber 2011, p. 232; emphasis added

<sup>48</sup> Alber’s (2009, p. 93) term.

<sup>49</sup> Alber’s (2011, p. 227) term.

<sup>50</sup> See Lamarque 2009, p. 250; Currie 2014, p. 443.

<sup>51</sup> For different approaches to evidence, see Mikkonen 2015.

While the methodological questions are pressing, the theory needs to be improved too. It is far from clear *how* our gaining new or enhanced cognitive frames (e.g. the ‘naturalization’ of a dying person’s interior monologue) from literary works actually enriches our understanding of our life-world. How does our engagement with Clarissa Dalloway’s perfectly unnatural ‘extended mind’ improve our social cognition? The same requirement goes for the idea of ‘imaginative stretching’. Imagining logical impossibilities is great intellectual fun—as in Borges’s stories, for instance—but what do we gain, so to say, from imagining them? The idea of ethical openness is fascinating but suspicious in the light of philosophical study on our ‘imaginative resistance’ to morally deviant views in fiction.

## 5. Conclusion

We have two fundamental ways of thinking and speaking of fictional works. We may engage with them imaginatively and explore them as artefacts. Theories of the cognitive value of literary fiction have generally focused on either of these two perspectives. In the ‘mimetic’ tradition, theories have built on the idea that literary works provide us a lifelike experience from which we learn. The problem is that in reducing the cognitive value of literature to the gaining of experiential knowledge we endorse naïve realism and treat art as a mirror of life. Besides, the mimetic approach fails in capturing what is distinctive and special in literature. In the ‘poetic’ tradition, in turn, the value significance of literature has been linked to literature’s distinctive features, such as foregrounding and defamiliarization thus caused. The problem of these views is their falling short in illuminating the proper ‘cognitive’ payoff. Also, there is the question of their generalizability, as there are very little distinctively ‘literary features’ uniting works of literature. Moreover, theories in both traditions have offered very little support for their claims. A comprehensive model of literary cognition ought to acknowledge the ‘dual standpoint’ of fiction and demonstrate how literary works could be cognitively valuable with regard to both their ‘natural’ experientiality and literary artificiality

In this paper, I have been partly playing the devil’s advocate. I would not conclude from the critical anti-cognitivist remarks that literary works (or here: modernist narratives) cannot have significant cognitive value. Rather, I think that the remarks should push the cognitivist, such as myself, to come up with more comprehensive and nuanced accounts of literary

interpretation and cognition. I am very sympathetic to the idea of the cognitive value of literature; what I wish for is a rigorous study of it.

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