

OF LITERATURE AND KNOWLEDGE

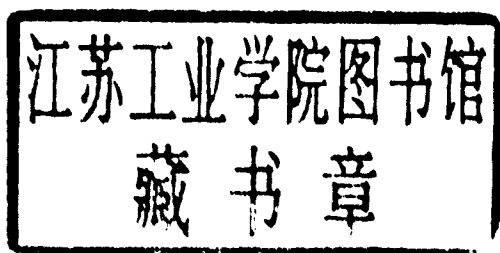
Explorations in narrative thought
experiments, evolution and game theory

Peter Swirski

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**This book is dedicated to William John Kyle and
Edward O. Wilson, scientists and humanists**

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Introduction

I wrote a novel because I had a yen to do it. I believe this is sufficient reason to set out to tell a story. Man is a storytelling animal by nature.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (Postscript)

Stories, stories everywhere. From cradle to grave we tell stories with hardly a pause from work, play, and sleep. We read bedtime stories to children, concoct stories about our fishing exploits, and confide “you’ll never believe this” stories to friends, and hairdressers. We shed tears over *Love Story*, titillate with the *Story of O.*, devour inside stories, and flock to see the sequels to *The Neverending Story*. We rehash triumphs at work as quest sagas, failures in romance as Aeschylean tragedies, and holiday hunts for that no-frills Athens hotel near Omonia Square as mini-odysseys. Late for work, we feed stories to the boss from the hallowed repertoire of traffic snarls, ailing relatives, and automobile malfunctions. Late at night we even dream stories, sometimes in beta-wave equivalent of Panasonic and Technicolor.

Beside ubiquity, our propensity for storytelling has other characteristics. First of all, it is universal. Every culture we know has developed its preferred range and type of stories.¹ Matter of fact, oftentimes we learn much of these chronologically or geographically distant societies through the stories they preserved in their versions of *Thousand and One Nights* or the *Eddas*. Second, the impulse to tell, invent, make up, construct, create, write, recite – in short, narrate – stories is inseparable from being *Homo sapiens sapiens*. We string words into sentences, sentences into plots, and from then we’re off on life’s journey to add our own stories to the stock of those that came before.

Finally, many of our stories are recognizable from culture to culture. To be sure, details of setting or character differ. One community’s elves become another people’s peris. One people’s tall tales and tricksters are another’s picaresques and picaros. But the underlying intercultural form is

common because the human experience is common. Over the years a persuasive case has been mounted, in fact, for a variety of such transliterary – or more exactly transcultural – universals. Michelle Sugiyama's recent "Narrative Theory and Function: Why Evolution Matters" made it even for such basic elements of storytelling as characters, goal-oriented action, and resolution.

Other literary evidence for human universals comes from multicultural analyses of folk and fairy tales.² Not that any of this would surprise Russian and Central European formalists, who already a century ago stressed literature's transnational and transcultural invariance. The first to document narratological regularities in the "deep structures" of many enduring story types, Propp, Shklovskii, and Eikhenbaum were also the first to systematically investigate the evolutionary dimension in literature and folklore. Yet, for all their acumen, the Russian scholars did not comment much on another aspect of our stories: their made-up character.

To be sure, many recurrent stories are grounded in real-life experience. Not to look too far, the assassination of JFK or the machinations of Nixon's Watergate "plumbers" were the subject of endless tellings and retellings in books, films, reports, editorials *et al.* We have even evolved sophisticated forms of telling stories with factual veracity and scholarly aplomb, so much so that they have come to be called histories and accepted as true. This is no less true in literature where the genre of (auto)biography rides coattails on the veracity and legitimacy of history. Reconstruction of real lives and events for a better understanding of the human condition, the edification of posterity, or both, was the avowed goal of writers as sundry as Plutarch, Franklin, and Churchill.

But stories grounded in real life and fashioned with a view to their accuracy are not the only kind we like to write and consume. For all its vaunted historical aplomb and slice-of-life immediacy, nonfiction has always had to contend for cultural supremacy with literary make-believe. No doubt to the chagrin of historians, the earliest societies for which records survive even mixed them freely into a mythopoetic stew. Today, a visit to a local bookstore or cineplex is all it takes to become convinced that people love fictions with a passion that belies their unreal character.

We love to make-believe about a ruddy elf with a Yeltsin nose and a posse of reindeer living at the North Pole – the same North Pole that Robert Peary flew over in 1908 and saw nothing but frozen wasteland. We devour stories about an ace detective domiciled at 221b Baker Street, even though London town's municipal records show that Mrs. Hudson's address was not even residential property in the days of "A Study in Scarlet." Generation after generation we return to the story of Donkey Hote (*pace* some of my "mondegreening" students) doing his knight-errant bit after

leaving La Mancha.³ Ditto for Ahab's vendetta on an albino whale, for postmen ringing twice for love-triangled couples, and for humanoid robots with positron brains behaviorally restricted by three asinine "laws" of robotics. Ditto for countless other fictions, none of which existed, and some that could not even exist.

What is it in literary fictions, these stories of make-believe, that makes readers while away hours, days, and in the case of literature professors even lives on them? The standard answer is that literature instructs and entertains. This is true and it would take a philistine to deny that stories attract by skilful execution, artistic flair, complex design, and a penchant for coloring a colorless day. Fictions take us to faraway places, exercise the imagination, offer a chance for self- and group-identification, and entertain us with humor, horror, hyperbole, and whatever other technique is in their arsenal.

Good fiction is, in other words, very much like good nonfiction – except that the latter is *ex definitio* about real events in the real world. Not that nonfictions are all, or even necessarily, true. Claudius Ptolemy's geocentric nonfiction certainly wasn't, and the Warren Report had all the makings of a great nonfiction without convincing anyone it was true. But, unlike made-up stories designed to generate the reflexive attitude of make-believe, in nonfiction the default design on the part of the author is the genesis of belief.⁴

There is little point in debating whether fiction – make-believe and made up as it is – can affect us in a real, nonfictional way. We all know it can, even without Marianne Moore's sage "Poetry" of imaginary gardens with real toads in them. We even dismiss a certain type of stories as tear-jerkers calculated to exploit our capacity to shed real tears over unreal people. A cathartic reaction to a piece of fiction implies, naturally, a proximate causal link between its contents and the reader's mental disposition. Tautologically almost, some kind of information transfer must be taking place.

Even so, this is quite a-ways from showing that narrative fiction is, and therefore should be approached as, an effective information bearer and an effective information processor. Emotional affect is not the same, after all, as intellectual gain. It is possible to be profoundly affected in a non-cerebral fashion, for example when the limbic system autonomically alters one's disposition during a sudden onset of a "fight or flight" stimulus. Is it truly and demonstrably information, rather than any other type of affectation, that is the currency of this literary exchange?

The question leads straight to the larger question of people's enduring interest in producing and consuming fiction. Why do we value stories *prima facie* grounded in fantasy or, less charitably, falsehood? Why do we emote

with nonexistent characters overcoming unreal obstacles? Logically and ontologically we ought not to take fiction seriously, yet the opposite is often the case. Time and again narrative fantasies dramatically prove their power to encroach on our real-life existence. The case of Heinrich Schliemann, who, with a copy of Homer's *Iliad* in hand, went to Asia Minor to unearth the historical Troy, is perhaps extreme. Still, it vividly demonstrates the abiding power of fiction to inform and cognitively enrich our lives.

If fictions are fairy tales for adults with no cognitive bite, then something else has to explain Abraham Lincoln's quip about Harriet Beecher Stowe's little fiction that started the Civil War. The same something else presumably lies behind the blacklisting of *Animal Farm* and *1984* by Big Brother censors in various parts of the globe. But if our ontological fantasies have real cognitive bite, where does the bite come from? That, as you may have surmised, is the mother of all questions for the book in your hands.

Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific method, and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know.

Bertrand Russell, "Science and Ethics"

The basic premise behind *Of Literature and Knowledge* is that the capacity of literary fictions for generating nonfictional knowledge owes to their capacity for doing what philosophy and science do – generating thought experiments. Not that *all* knowledge in literature can be traced to thought experiments. Historical novels transmit knowledge of history much in the same manner that historians transmit it. Moreover, in *thought* experiments there is no question of equipment setup and instrumental manipulation, the goal of which is the production of data by means of which a hypothesis can be (dis)confirmed. Armchair inquiries may therefore look nothing like the paradigmatic goings-on among researchers in scientific institutes.

In literature they may even take the form of folktales, such as the one about Indian King Sharim and his vizier, Sissa Ben Dahir, the inventor of chess. Pleased with the game, the monarch is said to have offered a reward of sixty-four pieces of gold (one for each square) to the vizier. The offer was countered by Ben Dahir's request for a grain of wheat for the first square, two for the second, four for the third, and so on. Deceived by its apparent modesty, the king acceded to the proposal, unaware that all the grain in the world then and now could not cover the amount. In this canonical account, the story of the invention of chess models a mathematical function, namely a differential equation of exponential growth ($y' = 2y$).

The same function animates other thought experiments, for example folding a sheet of paper fifty times over. The counterfactual abstracts away the struggle of dealing with tiny paper folds and focuses only on the thickness of the resulting wad. For most people it will not be very thick at all: a couple of feet or a couple of meters, but not – as in the correct answer – so thick as to reach beyond the sun. To make the thought experiment even more robust, one might manipulate the key variables – the number of folds or the thickness of the paper. In the story of the king and vizier, one could vary the number of squares on the chessboard (which would no longer be a chessboard) or the number of coins. Either way, the onset of numerical explosion will exhibit the dramatic difference between exponential and polynomial equations.

As an artform, literature has traditionally been studied less for its modeling than for its aesthetic value. In the words of one philosopher of art, “the attempt to orient research towards the literary specificity of texts and utterances has amounted to focusing on what may be loosely identified as their aesthetic qualities.”⁵ Doing so, it is assumed, we study literature *qua* literature. Even before New Criticism, this may have been a not unreasonable program for an energetic but amorphous area of academic activity hot in pursuit of field-specific methodology (and, through it, disciplinary identity). But over the course of history the focus on aesthetics – and whatever else went into the crucible in accordance with the winds of interpretive fashion – precipitated a neglect of literature as an instrument of inquiry.

That we learn from stories is a truism. Moreover, it is a truism held for so long and by so many that, like falling apples or the vector of time, it has wormed its way into our collective subconscious. As a consequence it has come to be regarded as pretheoretical and thus in no need of inquiry. A paucity of research into *how* we learn from literary fictions has, in turn, impoverished our understanding of *what* we may learn from them. Next to the epistemology of science – better known as the theory of confirmation – the epistemology of letters is, after all, a fledgling enterprise. As a result, the informational transfer between real life and narrative make-believe, and the cognitive mechanisms behind such a transfer, remain under-investigated and not fully understood.

Today’s aestheticians and metacritics are less inclined to aesthetic autonomy when explaining the processes behind the composition and reception of literary works. Equally, for many (though obviously not all) writers and readers the cognitive dimension of literature is as vital as the literary. It may be, to paraphrase Richard Feynman, that booklovers need a sound theoretical underpinning to how they learn from stories as much as birds need ornithology. But scholars of literature, humanists, and even

general readers alarmed by the political hegemony of scientism at the expense of *belles lettres* might be keen to find out how literature relates to science in cognitive terms. They might be no less keen to find out what a puissant intellectual tool it is in its own right.

Historians, sociologists, ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, and, not least, storytellers and story scholars have always recognized the cognitive power of fiction. But epistemically one needs to square this fact with the perception that truth and nonfiction are one thing, whereas fiction is, well . . . just fiction. It is for no other reason that “telling stories” is a colloquial synonym for lying, or that you can sweep away a child’s fear for the heroine in distress with an ontological bracket: “It’s just a story.” There is something inherently puzzling about milking real knowledge from unreal cows, and this something is the principal explanatory challenge for any account of literature as an instrument of inquiry.

I suggest that by placing literary fictions on the level of thought experiments, a well-established and increasingly well-understood instrument of learning, we may come closer to disentangling the riddle. Stories are adaptive tools to help us navigate more efficiently – or more colorfully, imaginatively, and memorably, which deep down still comes down to more efficiently – our time on earth. Philosophic and scientific counterfactuals, that is, propositions that map consequences of events that by definition did not occur, generate knowledge as part of their field-specific hunts for knowledge. My contention is that a significant chunk of narrative fiction generates knowledge in a similar manner and, at least in part, for similar reasons.⁶

Given that philosophers and scientists engage in research, does it follow that literary fictions can be a research tool, too? The litterateurs, for one, have no doubt. *Hypotheses fingo*, proclaimed Poe, setting out in his cosmological poem *Eureka* to construct a “train of ratiocination as rigorously logical as that which establishes any demonstration in Euclid.”⁷ Italo Calvino echoed Poe’s confidence by identifying his own *t zero* as an attempt “to make narrative out of a mere process of deductive reasoning.” In a Harvard lecture Bernard Malamud defended a proposition that an outline for a novel “is the equivalent of a scientific hypothesis.” In “The State of the Novel” Walker Percy insisted that literature is cognitive because it “discovers and knows and tells, tells the reader how things are, how we are, in a way that the reader can confirm with as much certitude as a scientist taking a pointer-reading.”

Taking my cue from the writers, I hold that the answer to the question “Can literature be an effective instrument of inquiry?” is affirmative. I believe, in other words, that literature is a form of knowledge or, what amounts to the same thing, that it can generate knowledge while coursing

through the minds of its creators and/or consumers. I also believe that, like so many other things that human beings do naturally, universally, and transculturally, our aptitude for imagining other worlds is rooted in evolutionary adaptation. Notwithstanding sporadic attempts to put creation “science” on equal footing with evolution in some part of the United States, the way to knowledge through fiction is via the neo-Darwinian paradigm.

Knowledge of the world and the experience of life can of course take many forms. While for some writers the production of literary knowledge involves abstract ideas, testable hypotheses, and perhaps even cumulative data, for many others it manifestly does not. In their hands literature is an enterprise and experience that is inalienably personal, emotive, and subjective. In these respects it diverges from both theoretical science and philosophy to the extent that their goals and practices are interpersonal, empirical, and objective. And that’s exactly the way it should be, for whatever unified inquiry means, it does *not* mean confusing tigers with zebras, even though both wear disciplinary stripes.

Thought experiments are devices of the imagination used to investigate the nature of things.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

“There is reason to believe,” concludes William Poundstone in *Labyrinths of Reason*, “that the ability to conceive of possible worlds is a fundamental part of human intelligence.”⁸ His synopsis of more than a century of research on the subject echoes what Ernst Mach, dean of scientists and philosophers of science, wrote in *Knowledge and Error* during the golden age of mechanics:

The planner, the builder of castles in the air, the novelist, the author of social and technological utopias is experimenting with thoughts; so too is the hardheaded merchant, the serious inventor and the enquirer. All of them imagine conditions, and connect with them their expectations and surmise of certain consequences: they gain a thought experience.⁹

More than any others, three studies have of late revitalized work on how counterfactual thinking leads to a gain in thought experience. Setting in motion a thriving research program, they continue to inform most debates on the nature and scope of this remarkable method of discovery. In order of appearance, the three are James R. Brown’s *The Laboratory of the Mind* (1991), Tamara Horowitz and Gerald J. Massey’s collection *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy* (1991) and Roy A. Sorensen’s *Thought*

Experiments (1992). Reflecting the common ground between them, Sorensen lays his cards on the table in terms of “gradualistic metaphilosophy.”¹⁰ This ungainly term hides a simple, although by no means straightforward, thesis. Thought experiments in philosophy, argues the author, are continuous with experiments in science, differing from them not in kind but only in degree. This assumption lies, in fact, behind most analytic work in philosophy. In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, for example, John Heil finds little unanimity in the ranks except, among others, “a conviction that philosophy is in some sense continuous with science.”¹¹

In this sense, you could say that my own book starts where *Thought Experiments* left off. This is because I extend the above precept to literary epistemology in general, and to literary fictions in particular. In line with Sorensen’s gradualistic metaphilosophy, *Of Literature and Knowledge* may be taken, therefore, as a book-length argument for gradualistic metacognition. Its centerpiece is that, when considered in cognitive terms, literary narratives lie on a continuum with philosophical thought experiments, differing from them not in kind but only in degree.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, I immediately reiterate that not all literary knowledge owes something to thought experiments. Nor is knowledge all there is to literary fictions or, a wiseass might remark, they would never be as fun to read as they are. But the many narratives that do rely on thought experiments justify the attempts to put literary knowledge on a level with that found in the social sciences. Needless to say, my central thesis, much as any of the subsidiary ones, is open to critique and falsification. It would be presumptuous to imagine that the chapters that follow are the last word on the matter.

On the other hand, should conclusive refutations be found wanting, it is hard to overestimate the implications for literary cognition. With no categorical difference between thought experiments in literature and philosophy – and with *Gedankenexperimente* in philosophy different only in degree from science – thought experiments in literature may also be removed from their cousins in the sciences only by a matter of degree. If corroborated, such a continuity would furnish a clear link between the disciplinary varieties of the same cognitive tool used by scientists, philosophers, as well as scholars and writers of fiction.

And corroboration is no longer a far-fetched notion. The 1990s ushered in a rich analytical harvest, more than ever before inclined to recognize the storytelling component in our mental and thought-experimental calisthenics. Terms such as “literary,” “narrative,” or “process-narrative” are increasingly yoked to analyses of thought experiments by a growing number of historians, philosophers, and sociologists of science.¹² This narrative turn reflects, in turn, the growing awareness of the extent to

which human minds categorize and memorize experience in storytelling terms. We think and remember best not in bits and bytes but in plots and stories (more on this in Chapter 4).

Given the surge of interest in the narrative dimension of thought experiments, it is rather odd that few philosophers, not to mention literature specialists, have actually studied literary narratives from this angle.¹³ It is odder still when you consider that approaching knowledge in fiction through thought experiments holds a great deal of promise for tackling the mechanisms of narrative comprehension. But then again, maybe it isn't. In the philosophical hierarchy, disciplines like aesthetics, narrative theory, and discourse analysis are frequently just a cut above cultural studies.

Be that as it may, the need to probe the cognitive connection between stories and thought experiments is quite urgent. Only by applying the analytic apparatus of philosophy and science to *literary* thought experiments can we find out, after all, how apposite these narrative analogies and metaphors really are. There is, of course, nothing in the above research program to endorse a reduction of *belles lettres* to a handmaiden of analytic philosophy or the social sciences. Thought experiments provide a constructive way of investigating how knowledge in literature works. But that's not all there is to telling and reading stories.

At the risk of repeating myself, for all the cognitive analogies with philosophy and science, literature is quite a different bird from both. First and foremost it is distinct by virtue of its gift for emotional renditions of subjective human experience. Any epistemological model – including my own – that identifies a common “knowledge factor” between literature, philosophy, and science will thus never amount to the whole story about any of them. The identity of these different approaches to discovering the world will, in other words, never be exhausted by what they have in common.

The focus on cognition in storytelling is not, therefore, meant to take anything away from fiction as an emotional chronicler of human experience. That would be madness akin to that which overpowers Lear, making him override his love for and profound emotional dependence on Cordelia in the name of a “higher” principle. In the spirit of Edward Wilson's arguments for the deep unity of all knowledge, my goal is simply to harness literary research to a more *consilient* program of inquiry. And with few philosophers lining up to pick up the gauntlet, the study of narratives as thought experiments is tantalizingly open to scholars of literature.

What has changed? Perhaps it is the gradual the encroachment of science upon issues that were once the sole preserve of the humanities.

John Barrow, *Between Inner Space and Outer Space*

To examine literature as a variety of thought experiment means to examine the ways in which it cognitively works in the manner comparable to established research disciplines. Approaching narrative fictions as the same *kind* of tool – though vastly different in *degree* – as the *Gedankenexperimente* of philosophy and science, this book is underwritten by three related epistemological claims. The first is that literary works can be powerful instruments of knowledge. The second is that a significant portion of this knowledge can be fruitfully assessed in interdisciplinary – and thus interpersonal and objective – terms. The third is that these interdisciplinary terms are framed by field-specific tools of inquiry whose cross-section is the cognitive Swiss army knife: thought experiment.

All three assumptions bring us face to face with the thorny question of the relation between literary and scientific modes of inquiry. The problem is indisputably complex, so much so that many humanists have fallen prey to the impression that there is little chance of untangling its multifarious positions and oppositions. Yet on closer inspection the relation between literature and the sciences loses its aura of messy intractability. Many of its apparent dichotomies turn out to be illusory, particularly those advanced by cognitive anti-realists, constructivists, conventionalists, solipsists, and other relativists.¹⁴

The recent years ushered in a number of censures from outside the humanities directed at its lax intellectual standards. Laying siege to deconstruction and other facets of postmodernism in the name of rationality and reason, intellectuals from Alan Sokal to John Searle must be applauded for their readiness to engage in such crossover peer review. But their focus on only one, albeit vociferous, bloc amounts to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The methodological poverty of *some* parts of the humanities validates neither the neglect of its non-constructivist elements nor the dismissal of literary research *in toto*. Rarely acknowledged in the exposés of humanists' quarrels with science are the alternatives prospected *within* literary scholarship which resolutely chip away at the façade of interpretive relativism and intellectual anarchy.

When Charles Percy Snow delivered the "Two Cultures" lecture in 1959, he may not have imagined that the rift between the scientific and literary cultures would linger past Y2K. Though his eyes were on the future, Snow's title harked back to an 1845 novel by Disraeli, whose *Sybil: The Two Nations* was a cry of indignation over social conditions that rent Britain into a nation of haves and have-nots. Picking up the gauntlet, Snow targeted the socio-political dangers lurking in the separation of literature and science which, to his mind, lay at the root of such social conditions. Science, he lamented, with all the means at its disposal, foundered on the lack of humanistic and political vision. Literature, with its aesthetics *du jour*, was adrift in the industrial and informational age.

With hindsight of almost fifty years, Snow's campaign seems a gallant – if failed – effort to correct the imbalance with which we valorize the type of knowledge harvested in the sciences and the arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way we train future generations of citizens and decision-makers. Humanities and liberal arts are garroted by funding shortages, while science faculties bloom, nurtured by donations and endowments from return-on-the-dollar-savvy school boards and governments. Between a genetics lab and a department of critical theory, the funding alternative is frequently a no-brainer. Next to the research colossi of modern science, literary studies must appear a cottage industry. Under the banner of postmodern “theory,” its intellectual harvest is often no more relevant than Thomist scholasticism, giving additional ammunition to near-sighted humanities-bashers.

Today in the high-tech reality of breeder reactors, Energia boosters, bio-computing, quantum tunneling, or antigen monocloning, the educated public's exposure to science has, indeed, increased manifold. It goes without saying that we need a better understanding of science and of the reasons why it works so well. The stakes of the post-industrial society do not leave much room for this type of ignorance. Not, at least, if we hope to survive. The question worth asking, of course, is how much of such journalistically hyped-up exposure has transmuted into the grasp of the nature of things.

But we need a better understanding of literature no less. Literature is not a crutch but an intellectual and emotional laboratory as we time-travel to the future one day at a time. It contains the narrative and cognitive machinery for examining issues that challenged thinkers of yesterday, and will continue to challenge thinkers of tomorrow. Because – good old-fashioned artificial intelligence notwithstanding – we are not just information processors but storytelling homeostats who experience the world much in the same fashion, and for much the same reasons, as in the days of *Gilgamesh*.

Briefly, then, the plan of action. The book is divided into five chapters, each of which illuminates a different aspect of the relation between narrative fiction and knowledge. Chapter 1, “Literature and knowledge,” carries out an anatomy of the contemporary critical scene with a view to mapping the different schools of thought on cognition in literature. Differentiating their sundry positions goes a long way towards fashioning a middle ground between postmodern excesses, on the one hand, and detractors who misjudge the discipline by focusing on these excesses, on the other. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and critiques that turn a blind eye on advanced work in select areas of literary studies ought not to be taken as gospel.