Introduction: Among the analogies

In her poem 'At the Fishhouses' Elizabeth Bishop contemplates the cold, clear water of a northern sea. She says she has

> seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
> slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
> icily free above the stones,
> above the stones and then the world.

She has seen it and she tells us what it would be like to touch it ('your wrist would ache immediately . . . and your hand would burn'). And then what it would be like to taste it:

> If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
> then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be.

This is not quite an imagination of knowledge, only of what knowledge resembles, but we sense the appeal and the severity of the claim immediately. Bishop's analogue for knowledge is 'dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,/drawn from the cold hard mouth/of the world', and 'our knowledge' itself is, she says, 'historical, flowing, and flown'.[1]

[1] Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979, pp. 65–66

We may want to associate knowledge, as many poets have, with southern lands rather than northern seas, and we may want to leave geography and metaphor behind, locating knowledge only in the minds of animals, especially humans. But whatever we do, as long as we don't let go of the project entirely, we shall have made a move towards the double subject of this book: the act of representing knowledge, especially elusive knowledge, in words; and the nature of the knowledge that literary arrangements of words can offer us.

But does literature offer us knowledge? It certainly represents it, as we have just seen. But a representation is, by definition, not the thing itself, and both literature and knowledge are words worth using carefully. There are all kinds of treasures which are not knowledge, and we should not betray them by giving them the wrong name.

The worry about the relation between literature and knowledge is a very old one, and it's not getting any younger. When Dorothy Walsh, in an elegant book called *Literature and Knowledge*, published in 1969, said the worry was old, she meant it went back at least to Plato. When Stathis Gourgouris says it is old, in a recent book called *Does Literature Think?*, he means the same thing. 'The idea that literature might harbor its own mode of knowledge is ancient, at least as old as the so-called quarrel between poetry and philosophy and Plato's notorious expulsion of the poets from the city in the *Republic*. It is fair to say that since Plato's famous decision there has been an implicit but consistent association of the poetic act with a peculiar, mysterious, and even dangerous sort of knowledge.'[2] Actually, even Socrates, who was the one making the decision, thought

[2] Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 2

the worry was old, and apologized for his dismissal of poetry by saying, 'But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication, let's also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy.'[3]

But Plato's worry is not ours, and indeed our worry, in 2005, is perhaps not quite the worry we might have had, did have, in 1969. This is one of the things it means to possess knowledge that is 'historical, flowing, and flown'. Or if the question we are asking is the same – to quote Dorothy Walsh, 'What kind of knowledge, if any, does literary art afford?', or more delicately, 'Do works of literary art, when functioning successfully as such, have any intimate engagement with what may be called knowledge?' – our reasons for asking it are different, and so is our idea of what might constitute an interesting answer. Walsh thought that the disengagement of literature from direct knowledge claims might 'be seen as the liberation of literature from the alien and extraneous burden of cognitive concern. So liberated, literature is free to develop its potentialities strictly as art.' The opposite view, she suggested, was not engagement with direct knowledge but a different sense of disengagement, the view that 'the disengagement provides the opportunity for the recognition of the distinctive kind of cognitive significance literary art can have'. 'Shall we see the disengagement as the liberation of Ariel?' Walsh asked. 'Or . . . shall we say that the magic island . . . cannot be abandoned and that the control of Prospero over both Ariel and Caliban must be sustained?'[4] I don't think many people are recommending

[3] Plato, *Republic*. Translated by C. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, p. 278

[4] Dorothy Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969, pp. 3, 11, 15, 30.

the liberation of Ariel these days, or a picture of literature 'strictly as art', and I don't wish to recommend them myself. But I do want to wonder, as Walsh did, whether the only alternative is total submission to Prospero.

The question that drives this book is an oldish one for me personally. At one time, around 1960, when I was trying to disentangle art from other human affairs, I would have said literature doesn't know anything and can't know anything. Literature is a form of play, and it plays at knowing as it plays at all kinds of other activities. It is infinitely valuable, but valuable as play, not as disguised or sweetened work. I now think that this formulation, and others like it, are ways of asking the question rather than answering it, and over the years I have found the question more and more puzzling. This is in part because I no longer want to disentangle art from other human affairs, only to understand its entanglement in them. Still, literature does make very special calls on us, and the question assumed a new shape for me a couple of years ago. The scene was a colloquium on the role of doubt in the human sciences, and all the participants – anthropologists, political scientists, historians, literary scholars and others – spoke happily in praise of doubt: as a precaution, a necessary modesty of method. Without doubt, they said, there can be no knowledge. But they also thought the doubting had to stop. Once we have exercised all the proper degrees of doubt, they suggested, we can give it up, and deliver the knowledge we have secured.

This seems to me an admirable, even indispensable programme for the advancement of learning, but it doesn't come close to describing what happens in the writing and reading and close study of literature. Literature, I wanted to say, isn't like this, it's the place where doubt never ends. But this isn't right. In fact, it's dangerously wrong. The entertainment of

possibilities in literature – and literature, in one crucial aspect, just is the entertainment of possibilities – resembles doubting, and is probably a good school for informed doubt. But it is not doubt, precisely because, in literature, alternatives are in play but not in contention.[5] We are interested not in the choices we are going to make but in the choices we could make, and we can always go back on our interpretative decisions. Indeed, we shall be better readers if we do go back on them, and there is no equivalent in practical life for the sheer, disinterested attraction of this multiplication of chances.

It's true that in many applications of literature – on the stage or the screen – certain decisions are made which cannot be reversed and so form part of the life of the director or the actor. Once you have settled on the intonation with which Lear and Cordelia are to say the word 'nothing', on the exact degree or mixture of anger, innocence, outrage, bewilderment, stubbornness and whatever else you want, there is no going back when the word is said, the die is cast. But the text remains, like a musical score, always ready

[5] Cf William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New York: New Directions, 1966, pp. 81–82. 'The conservative attitude to ambiguity is curious and no doubt wise; it allows a structure of associated meanings to be shown in a note, but not to be admitted; the reader is encouraged to swallow the thing by a decent reserve; it is thought best not to let him know he is thinking in such a complicated medium . . . Here as in recent atomic physics there is a shift in progress, which tends to attach the notion of a probability to the natural object rather than to the fallibility of the human mind . . . We must conclude either that a great deal has been added to Shakespeare by the mere concentration upon him of wrong-headed literary attention, or that his original meaning was of a complexity to which we must work our way back, and which we may as well acknowledge without attempting to drape ourselves in a transparent chain of negatives.'

for another, quite different performance. Kafka wrote that the unalterability of the text is the commentators' despair,[6] but we could register the same perception in another light, and think of the text as having a strange ability to survive all alterations. And it's not hard to imagine that a source of theological despair could be the basis of a certain moral freedom, whereby we actively conjugate what is with what might be. Literature, like doubt, will not let knowledge rest; but not because it loves only doubt or doesn't care for knowledge.

This proposition owes more than a little to Wittgenstein's extraordinary sequence of meditations on what happens when we seem to find ourselves seeing and thinking at the same time, as when we recognize the first and then the second aspect of an optical puzzle, or suddenly realize we know someone we hadn't at once remembered. 'I *see* that it has not changed.' And again, 'The expression of change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged.' The riddle for the philosopher is that he regards thinking as an action and seeing as a condition. How can an experience be made up of both elements at once? 'How is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*?' Literature doesn't answer this question, but it does enact the riddle constantly, offering what seem to be direct perceptions intricately entwined with often elaborate interpretations. It does this so constantly that we can hardly speak of a riddle any more. 'When it looks as if there were no room for such a form

[6] Franz Kakfa, *Der Proceß*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993, p. 234. Translated by Breon Mitchell. New York: Schocken Books, 1998, p. 220. '*Die Schrift ist unveränderlich und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdrück der Verzweiflung darüber*'. ('The text is immutable, and the opinions are often only an expression of despair over it.') Over the fact of immutability, that is.

between other ones,' Wittgenstein says, 'you have to look for it in another dimension.'[7]

I'm deeply in agreement with Paul Fry's argument about the suspension of knowledge in literature, the moments of what he calls 'ostension' in which people and things are held in their nonsignifying opacity.[8] Without such moments there would be no literature. But a multiplication can produce an effect very similar to that of a suspension, and I see now that I am mainly trying to explore the unsettling of direct knowledge by other knowledges; and the return of knowledge after its suspension. I also share Derek Attridge's sense of the singularity of literature, its restlessness and its resistance to rules. And yet Attridge himself says that he 'almost' wishes to accept the argument that literary works are not to be distinguished from others, even if he adds that this 'almost' is the subject of his book.[9] Literature is a name for a set of extraordinary achievements in words, but there is also something admirably ordinary about the literary impulse, something we find in the slightest hints and verbal gestures of ordinary life, whenever we speak playfully or ironically, or call something by a name that is not its own; whenever we see or say that people and places have markedly changed while stubbornly, loyally remaining the same.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, pp. 193, 196, 200. Wittgenstein's italics.

[8] Paul Fry, *A Defense of Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 13 and passim. 'Ostension . . . is that indicative gesture toward reality which precedes and underlies the construction of meaning . . . it is the deferral of knowledge by the disclosure, as a possibility, that existence can be meaning-*free*.'

[9] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 10.

There is an excellent focus for the old and new question, a brilliant brief statement of its current force, and a way of holding the whole issue before our minds, in Peter de Bolla's book *Art Matters*. De Bolla is looking at a Barnett Newman painting (*Vir Heroicus Sublimis*) in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He has decided that the usual critical questions – what does this painting mean?, what is it trying to say? – are the wrong ones. He offers one or two not all that appealing alternatives ('how does this painting determine my address to it?, how does it make me feel?, what does it make me feel?') and says that 'beyond these questions lies the insistent murmur of great art, the nagging thought that the work holds something to itself, contains something that in the final analysis remains untouchable, unknowable'. Then de Bolla arrives at what I find the truly haunting question: 'What does this painting know?'[10]

The question has two immediate and very interesting implications. First, that a painting might know something that the painter didn't. And second, that the painting probably knows a lot that it is not going to tell us. I'm interested in the murmur of small art as well as great art – I think small art may know things, too – and I want to put the question to literature rather than to painting, but the question is the same. To frame it rather schematically, thinking of Proust and asthma, say, we could ask, not what Proust knew about the condition or what doctors know now or knew in Proust's time, but what *A la recherche du temps perdu* knows about asthma – what it knows and perhaps will not tell us directly, or what it knows that only novels know, or only this novel knows. Many see dangers in such personification – the novel

[10] Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 31.

is not a person and can't know anything, only novelists and readers can – but for the moment I should like this form of the question, and the figure of speech, just to hang in the air, like an old tune, or the memory of a mood.

There is something unavoidably oblique about literature. It could always say, like Salman Rushdie's narrator in *Shame*, 'My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality.'[11] Sometimes the angle is not at all slight. Yet, strangely enough, as I have already suggested, we meet this obliquity head on. Dorothy Walsh concludes that 'literary art, when functioning successfully as literary art, provides knowledge in the form of realization: the realization of what anything might come to as a form of lived experience'.[12] This is very well put, and much of what I have to say is merely a gloss on this claim. But literature not only reports on what happens and on what may happen, it is itself 'a form of lived experience'. We have the direct experience of words behaving and misbehaving. Our reading is an immediate event, like tasting salt or coriander.

Roland Barthes says that literature is found wherever words have savour, and he tells us that the French words for knowledge and savour (*savoir* and *saveur*) have the same etymology in Latin. My scholarly friends laugh at this claim, and I don't doubt their grounds. By my ear reminds me that in Spanish the words not only share a false etymology but are still the same – '*quién sabe?*' is 'who knows?', and '*a qué sabe?*' is 'what does it taste of? – and so I find the connection hard to shake off. Barthes continues, 'Where knowledge is concerned, things must, if they are to become what they are, what they have been, have that ingredient,

[11] Salman Rushdie, *Shame*. London: Picador, 1984, p. 29.
[12] Walsh, *Literature and Knowledge*, p. 136.

the salt of words. It is this taste of words which makes knowledge profound, fecund.'[13] The knowledge Barthes has in mind is distinctly the knowledge found in literature, and I shall return to his intricate thoughts on this topic. What is particularly interesting here, and neatly clarified by the metaphor of taste, is the proposition that things have their present and past life in words, that in words they become what they are, which is already a paradox, like slouching towards Bethlehem to be born, and also become what they have been. We could translate 'this taste of words' as 'this taste for words' and thereby shift the activating of knowledge slightly from language towards the person.

There are two other sets of meanings I hope the notion of taste may discreetly evoke. If the taste of words offers knowledge, if literature gives us a taste of knowledge, this can only be a taste, a sample, rather than an elaborate or plentiful meal. We are going to have to go elsewhere for the continuous main course. And if we directly face literature's obliquity in one sense, it's important that we respect its indirection in another, because the relation between literature and knowledge is always complex.

And then who could forget the most famous association of tasting and knowledge in the Western and Near Eastern world? God tells our first ancestor that if he eats of the tree of good and evil he will 'surely die', but there is another narrative. 'And the Serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die. For God doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened: and ye shall be as

[13] Roland Barthes, *Leçon*. Paris: Seuil, 1978, p. 21. Translated by Richard Howard in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982, p. 465