

# *Drawing Reflections: What Kind of Knowledge Does Self-referential Literature Yield?*

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*As part of a larger effort to explore the multiform relations between philosophy and literature—a research field that attracts growing attention—we focus on the philosophical aspects of literature. Our project tackles the subject of literature’s potential to generate knowledge. In our paper we intend to dwell on self-referential literature. This intriguing dimension of literary expression is associated with works in which self-reflective moves can be traced, that is, texts in which literary writing refers to and reflects on literature itself. The self-reflection of self-referential literature assumes many shapes, affecting in various ways the constitution of both content and form. Thus, our aim becomes twofold. First, we look into variants of literary self-reflection, while pondering the philosophical implications of each of those. Here, we are going to draw on examples from the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Maurice Blanchot and Clarice Lispector. Second, we propose to consider the necessary conditions and the prospects for obtaining some kind of knowledge by means of self-referential literature. In so doing, we examine alternative conceptions and kinds of knowledge which could be taken into account.*

**Keywords:** Philosophy and Literature; self-reflection; self-referential literature; cognitive function; value of literature.

## *1. Introduction: philosophy and literature*

Philosophy and literature, as two spheres of human intellectual activity, exist and develop through a vast number of texts. This self-evident

observation is a necessary reminder of the multiformity of both philosophical thought and literary creation. Similarly, the character of the works/sites of their encounter and intersection is also polymorphous. In particular, we can detect literary qualities in philosophical texts and philosophical elements in literary works. On the one hand, authors (such as Dante, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Mann, Borges, and Kundera) often engage with abstract concepts and problems and create literary works of philosophical interest. On the other hand, philosophers and thinkers (such as Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, and Wittgenstein) frequently take good care of the form of their writings and the linguistic rendering of their theses and arguments, imposing on them a variety of styles.<sup>1</sup>

As part of a larger effort to explore the multiform relations between philosophy and literature—dwelling on a research field that attracts growing attention—we focus on the philosophical aspects of literature. In other words, we are interested in literary works where we can find concerns and issues also recognized as philosophically significant. It suffices to consider the writings of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Mann, Proust, Beckett, and Kundera to realize the extent of the presence of “philosophical” themes in literature. By “philosophical” we mean, as Jukka Mikkonen (2011: 21) aptly remarks, the examination of fundamental issues related to ethics (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy), metaphysics and ontology (Borges), logic and language (Carroll), philosophical concepts, such as “time” (Mann, Proust), and human existence (Sartre, Kundera). In fact, authors seem to integrate their reflections in their literary compositions, which are sometimes shaped by pre-existing philosophical positions or even explicitly linked to the theoretical work of a particular philosopher. Furthermore, in some texts, authors elaborate on themes with philosophical implications and attempt to raise questions or illustrate the import of philosophical problems using their literary apparatus. In these cases, literature’s aptitude to incite original reflection on issues of philosophical interest is evident.

One of these issues is the nature of literature itself. Indeed, there is an intriguing dimension of literary expression associated with works in which self-reflective moves can be traced; that is, texts in which literary writing refers to and reflects on literary expression itself. Such texts highlight the philosophical dimension of literature, offering thoughts on the phenomenon of literary creation, posing and exploring relevant questions through the use of purely literary devices and materials.

<sup>1</sup> There are different ways of approaching the immense subject of the relationship and intersections between philosophy and literature. Philosophers such as Alexander Nehamas, Michael Frede, and Charles H. Kahn examine this issue through the study of philosophical texts displaying essential literary features (Nehamas 1985; Frede 1992; Kahn 1996). Conversely, philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell, and Philip Kitcher attempt to interpret the relationship between philosophy and literature through philosophical readings of literary texts (Nussbaum 1990; Cavell 2003; Kitcher 2013).

This reflection on literary works is related to issues of ontological interest, which primarily concern the properties, possibilities, and nature of literature. In particular, the process and the constitutive elements of writing, as well as the functions of language, the raw material of literature, become key objects of investigation.

The self-reflection of self-referential literature assumes many shapes, affecting in various ways the constitution of both content and form. We shall look into the main variants of literary self-reflection while pondering the philosophical implications of each. In other words, it seems necessary to proceed to a conceptual clarification of the features of self-referential literature by examining its self-reflective tropes. In the course of this enterprise, questions arise concerning the ability of self-referential literature to produce knowledge. We propose to consider the necessary conditions and the prospects for obtaining a type of such knowledge.

The cognitive potentialities of literature have attracted the attention of a multitude of contemporary scholars. In fact, in order to lay the foundations of the theoretical background of our approach to knowledge that self-referential literature may be able to generate, we find it necessary to refer to theories that discuss the cognitive function and value of literature in general. Through the critical discussion of these theories, we expect to attain a better grasp of the dimensions of literary knowledge. In addition, we will become acquainted with the questions and the issues that emerge from literature's correlation with the pursuit of knowledge. For instance, in contemporary bibliography, especially in the analytic tradition, the issue of literature's cognitive function has been directly related to the question of the truth that a literary text is likely to convey.<sup>2</sup> This step is essential to understand the cognitive potentiality of self-referential literature.

## *2. Forms of literary knowledge: analogies with philosophical knowledge*

There are many issues regarding the cognitive import of literary texts that we should take into account, before focusing on the peculiar kind of knowledge that we believe could be attributed to the self-referential texts we are interested in. There are many wide-ranging debates, involving different aspects of these issues, the details of which extend far beyond the reach of our analysis in this short paper. In what follows, we shall summarize only the main points we want to touch upon, with a view to sketching the premises of our reasoning, which will be further illustrated by particular examples, leading to some tentative conclusions.

To begin with, one has to deal with well-known serious objections to the very idea of substantial literary knowledge, some of which are also

<sup>2</sup> For more on this issue, see Davies (2016), Donnelly (2019), Currie (2020) and Young (2021).

put forth by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in their seminal work, *Truth Fiction and Literature* (Lamarque and Olsen 1994). These objections are often buttressed by sceptical claims that are presented through some version of the so-called “banality argument,” the “no evidence argument” and the “no argument argument.” Noël Carroll discusses and tries to counter such arguments, pertaining to the cognitive dimension not only of literature, but also of art in general (Carroll 2010 [2002]) and we are going to draw on his work. However, we must first focus on the main conceptions of knowledge we will be considering.

Epistemology textbooks distinguish among three forms of knowledge that may be pertinent to our concerns: a) Propositional knowledge or knowledge of facts (knowledge *that* something is the case); b) knowledge by acquaintance (direct awareness of, or connection to and familiarity with something or someone—an experience or a person); c) knowing *how* (knowing how to perform a task, often involving the exercise of a skill) (Russell 1912; Geuss 2005). Moreover, these forms are respectively associated with different kinds of scientific and conceptual, or mundane, moral, practical, and technical knowledge, which make it possible for us not only to represent facts and states of affairs, but also to cope with various circumstances, and solve problems we are confronted with in our everyday lives.

Philosophers, and especially analytic philosophers, seem to be interested mostly in propositional knowledge, although, in recent times, they have been increasingly turning to the study of the other main forms of knowledge, exploring their relations with the former. Of course, there are still ongoing debates about the definition of propositional knowledge, involving truth and the justification of beliefs, often leading to sceptical dead ends.<sup>3</sup>

Now, when one approaches literary texts she may ask herself which of the above forms and kinds of knowledge are afforded by the experience of writing and of reading them. We think that she may find it more plausible to look for and aspire to some varieties of conceptual, moral and/or practical knowledge, providing a better grasp and a perspicuous understanding of possibilities, and relating to what it is like to live in a certain way, or, if one does not object to engaging in normative pursuits regarding such matters, how one *ought to live in order to live well*. Thus, we are also confronted by the problem of the possibility of *normative* knowledge.

At this point, it is worth exploring parallels and analogies between the kind of knowledge philosophy seems to be aiming at and the knowledge which we may expect to find in and through literature. Naturally, different genres and kinds of literature may allow us to obtain different varieties of knowledge. These include mainly prose, but also po-

<sup>3</sup> Here, one would have to refer to epistemological discussions of Gettier counterexamples to the traditional definition of knowledge, regarding whether knowledge can be fully understood as “justified true belief” (Dancy 1985).

etry: short stories and mostly novels, especially realist and historical fictional narratives, works of phantasy and science fiction, epic and lyric poems, drama, etc., extending in a multitude of directions of literary creation, which we cannot attempt to survey in the context of the present discussion. As we have already noted in the introduction of this paper, we intend to investigate and highlight the cognitive implications and, perhaps, the achievements of self-referential fictional texts, particularly modernist and post-modernist, which often assume experimental forms.

Actually, it can be observed that there are also queries about the possibility and the nature of *philosophical* knowledge. Despite the fact that the norms guiding philosophical inquiry are mainly cognitive or quasi-cognitive, some thinkers claim that the goals they set cannot be fully attained, not only in practice, but also in principle. They may even think that, properly speaking, these goals should not be considered to be cognitive. For example, one may wonder whether we do seek knowledge when we engage in the activity of elucidating concepts and of exploring modalities of linguistic usage, or in the practices of dissolving traditional metaphysical problems, pursued by Wittgenstein and some of his followers, which may be motivated by a *quietist* intent and perform a *therapeutic* function.

Without embarking upon a detailed presentation of alternative metaphilosophical conceptions of the nature and the forms of philosophical knowledge, we could perhaps isolate three or four families of positions: a) According to naturalistically and scientifically minded philosophers, the knowledge supposedly aimed at by philosophical thought differs from scientific knowledge only in generality or breadth and depth, not in nature. Philosophy should try to imitate the empirical sciences and even emulate their methods. b) The logical and conceptual work of philosophy may come before or after the sciences to provide methodological tools and to clear the ground for cognitive endeavours, but it doesn't itself display an essentially cognitive character; philosophy is not and cannot be one of the sciences. c) Philosophy offers some peculiar or even paradoxical knowledge (or self-knowledge) of the mind, of its activities, and of its relations to reality, sometimes dubbed "transcendental"; the insights it affords cannot be compared to the results of scientific investigations (involving gathering empirical evidence, forging hypotheses to be tested and verified or falsified). It could perhaps reveal possibilities of viewing the world and of endowing it with meaning in particular domains, aiming at some form of systematic elaboration and arrangement, or at reaching a "reflective equilibrium" of concepts and principles of thinking on the one hand, and of quasi-"experiential" data, usually in the form of intuitions, on the other (Putnam 1978; Granger 1988; Gutting 2009). Now, if we do follow a certain path of development of the transcendental tradition in the domain of continental philosophy, we could perhaps speak of a certain form of *negative* knowledge. d) Last but not least, philosophy may yield practi-

cal knowledge of the significance and of the role of moral, aesthetic, and other values, guiding our action and conferring meaning to our lives. Thus, through the study of philosophical thinking, we do obtain knowledge of rules of conduct and, more generally, of many possible forms of an art of living (Nehamas 1985; Hadot 1995; Kitcher 2013).

We would like to argue that it is the third of the above options, and perhaps, to some extent, the fourth, which could be fruitfully employed to cast light on the form of knowledge we may legitimately look for in self-referential literature. We believe that this dimension of literary expression and the kind of texts to which it gives rise and in which it is embodied can be regarded as essentially philosophical in an important sense. We find in them an internal link between literary creation and philosophical reflection. Such reflection upon the act of literary writing itself reveals the expressive potential and the limits of language and of the mind, casting light on conceptual contents and specific mental acts which are shaped by linguistic means. Literary texts that are partly or wholly self-referential help their authors and readers perform thought experiments of a peculiar form. And it is widely acknowledged that thought experiments are a method par excellence of philosophical inquiry in various domains and levels.<sup>4</sup>

Now, there are many questions to which we have already alluded to and which we should take into account. Here, we shall simply formulate some of the most central ones to which we may eventually have to come back, after a brief discussion of a few cases of relevant literary texts: Should we give up completely appeals to truth, apparently necessarily related to definitions of propositional (and representational knowledge), insofar as the main marks or features, not only of truth as correspondence, but even of minimalist conceptions of truth<sup>5</sup> do not seem to apply to the kinds of non-propositional knowledge, supposedly provided by the texts we want to examine?<sup>6</sup> Should perhaps the speech-acts and the linguistic performances of extensively and essentially self-referential literature be construed as destructive, nihilist moves, undermining claims to objective truth as a whole, by detaching the text from all its referents in the external world? If this were so, we would have to ask ourselves to what kind of “negative” knowledge the outcome of such move would amount? Or, could we rather turn to more

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the main arguments against literary knowledge, Carroll writes: “It is extremely peculiar that philosophers should raise these particular objections against literature, since philosophy employs a gamut of techniques to produce knowledge and learning that are analogous to those found in literature. What I have in mind here specifically are thought experiments, examples and counterexamples that are often narrative and generally fictional in nature” (Carroll 2002: 208 and ff). Concerning literary works as thought experiments, see also Davies (2007), Egan (2016), Elgin (2014) and Vidmar (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Features such as objectivity, uniqueness, etc.—see Wright (1992).

<sup>6</sup> There are similar worries about such knowledge—and truth—especially regarding poetry (Geuss 2005).

metaphysical notions of truth, verging on the mystical, often associated with some romantic authors and put forth by continental thinkers, such as Heidegger?

### 3. *Self-referential literature: conceptual clarification and examples*

We may consider an artistic or literary work to be self-referential when it refers to itself as such and/or when the author refers through it to himself (for example) as its creator. In other words, in a self-referential work, the author refers, in an explicit and/or implicit way, to the means and rhetorical strategies employed in the literary text itself as well as to his ideas and queries regarding the nature of his literary status and practice. As is to be expected, self-referentiality manifests itself in various ways in both poetry and prose. As mentioned above, writers and poets use literary materials and proceed to treatments that manifest their peculiar concern for the process and the main factors of their creative activity, exploring questions of ontological interest, concerning primarily the properties, possibilities, and nature of literature. Thus, we see that the self-reflective dimension of self-referential texts arises at different levels and in different guises.

In fact, it could be pointed out that, strictly speaking, a poem or a work of literary fiction is self-referential when its theme and the way it is elaborated highlight its own composition *qua* a *particular* literary object, e.g. reflecting on its content, as well as on its form. However, self-referentiality may involve reflection, more generally, on the nature of literature, its aesthetic and other functions and its modes of expression. It is this broader sense, which we believe becomes prominent in modernist and post-modernist texts. The discussion that follows focuses on works which exemplify both senses of self-referentiality and the self-reflection that it entails.

Indeed, one of the cardinal objects of self-reflective works, among others, is language as used in creative writing; the raw material of literature. In particular, we note that in the last two centuries, many writers have attempted, through their poetic and prose compositions, to explore issues related to the role and functions of language. Although their reflections are expressed in the works' content, in some cases they are also evident at the level of form. To put it in another way, the reflective content is organically linked and/or manifested through linguistic experimentation and stylistic innovations that depart from the classical formal paths, contributing to their expansion. In what follows, we refer to self-referential works, both poetry and prose, in which we trace these reflective movements. It seems necessary to examine closer texts that capture the self-reflective activity of literary writing and—as we do when we place microorganisms under a microscope—to focus on their inner movements but also to observe their particular characteristics. In this way, we will have taken another necessary step toward

understanding how self-referential literature can serve as a source of original reflection with philosophical implications and cognitive import.

3.1. *Stéphane Mallarmé: Fly so towards your lips/  
Exclude from it if you start/The real because it's cheap.*

Mallarmé's poetic work embodies a kind of reflection that is also found in his theoretical writings but is fully activated within the poet's literary creation. In the case of Mallarmé, the self-referentiality of poetic language is associated with a particular conception of a negative, canceling function that also pictures its relation to reality. Here, then, literature is thematized as an experience of the Null. That is, the poem and its smaller units, the lines, exist only as the negation of reality. Literature itself is treated as a negative activity that results in Null. Through poetic practice, or as Mallarmé himself describes it, through "digging the verses," the poet's aesthetic perception is crystallized. The poetic text is a set of linguistic similarities and differences, and with it, the author "imitates" real objects' impressions, by substituting linguistic signs for them, and thus abolishing their real ontological status, while at the same time also annihilating himself as a subject.

Thus, for Mallarmé both the poetic subject and the objects of external reality are negated as existing beings and reified in writing. This conception is in line with a more general materialist conception which treats the spirit and its derivatives as transformations of matter. Mallarmé's approach permeates his poetry and is not expressed through the formulation of arguments, but is mainly demonstrated through the poetic work itself. This interpretation of the importance of the poetic process is present in many of Mallarmé's poems. In one of his literary compositions (Mallarmé 1895 [1992, 2018]) in the form of an English sonnet, we read:

All summarised, the soul/ When slowly we breathe it out/ In several rings of smoke/ By other rings wiped out// Bears witness to some cigar/ Burning skilfully while/ The ash is separated far/ From its bright kiss of fire// Should the choir of romantic art/ Fly so towards your lips/ Exclude from it if you start/ The real because it's cheap// Meaning too precise is sure/ To void your dreamy literature.<sup>7</sup> (Mallarmé 2018: 57)

The poem has a meta-poetic tone and a strong self-reflective character. Here, the poet is implicitly likened to a smoker and the main theme of the work is the banishment and transformation of reality that takes place within the poetic work. This process of nullification is described in the first two verses of the poem through the use of the image of the smoker. The composition of a work is presented as transforming the substance of reality and of meaning into the ethereal material of tobacco, which however burns itself and disappears. In the first two stanzas, the condition of this transformation is clearly stated. And the poetic subject itself dies within this authorial experience. It is a spiri-

<sup>7</sup> Antony Kline's translation (2018).



tual death that is vividly described in the second verse as a gradual exhalation of the soul. The poet as a part and manipulator of the process of effacement and transformation of reality, as described by Mallarmé, should follow a corresponding course within the framework of his poetic creation.

Thus, for Mallarmé, the process of writing constitutes the framework within which reality and the poetic subject undergo an essential concentration that annihilates and realizes them simultaneously. In this poem of the poet's late writing period, the idea that the spirit is the power of negation and that which negates itself is now crystallized. It is a rather complex and sibyllic position, which Mallarmé attempts to explore through his literary writing. What is interesting here, as Campion observes, is that Mallarmé discovers that literature can and must reflect on itself (Campion 1994). For in this way, and within its own activity, it is itself actualized, but at the same time abolishing its object, its subject, and itself. Mallarmé's idiosyncratic poetic reflection and experimentation expanded the boundaries and possibilities of literature and influenced many modernist writers (and continental philosophers), offering insights into the experience of writing and raising questions about its constitutive elements.

### 3.2. *Paul Valéry: In myself I renew my gods, my enigmas...*

The movement of thought, the function of consciousness, and their ability to form a unique perception of the reality of the spirit through poetic expression are also depicted in the work of Paul Valéry. Valéry's perspective is developed both in his poems and in his theoretical writings. There, he defends and gives prominence to the literary artist's ability and capacity to reflect through her writing. In his text *Poetry and Abstract Thought* (1939 [2007]) Valéry argues as follows:

Every true poet is much more capable than is generally known of right reasoning and abstract thought. [...] I have said, nevertheless, that the poet has his abstract thought and, if you like, his philosophy; and I have said that it is at work in his very activity as a poet. I said this because I have observed it, in myself and in several others. [...] Well, every time I have worked as a poet, I have noticed that my work exacted of me not only that presence of the poetic universe I have spoken of, but many reflections, decisions, choices, and combinations, without which all possible gifts of the Muses, or of Chance, would have remained like precious materials in a workshop without an architect.<sup>8</sup> (Valéry 2007: 61)

In his seminal poetic composition *La Jeune Parque* (*Young Fate*), with which he broke his twenty years of literary silence, the symbolist poet deals with issues of existential and ontological character that also concern philosophical thought. The "mystery of life" and the "mystery of

<sup>8</sup> The extract is taken from a lecture Valéry delivered in 1939 at the University of Oxford entitled "Poetry and Abstract Thought." The English translation by Denise Folliot used here was first published in 1958 and republished in 2007 in *The American Poetry Review*.

being” are at the thematic core of the poem. Valéry, using his literary tools, describes the stages the reflective alertness of human consciousness goes through when it engages in the quest for a “total form of knowledge.” The description of this mental process discloses the realization of the ultimate failure of human consciousness in its effort to cast light on Being. This “odyssey” is outlined in the following lines:

And I alive, erect/ Stubborn, and secretly armed with my inner void,/ ...Ah!  
 how much may it grow in my questing night,/ That secret half of my divided  
 heart,/ And my art grow deeper from obscure probings!.../ ...In myself I re-  
 new my gods, my enigmas,/ My paces interrupted by words to the heav-  
 ens,/ My pauses, on a step bearing a reverie/ That follows in a wing’s mirror  
 a varying bird,/ Wagers a hundred times void against sun,/ And burns, at  
 the dark goal of my gaping marble. (Valéry 1977: 209—211)

The attempt to decipher the movements of thought that are expressed through poetry reveals the need to examine the particular nature of poetic language, its relations with the meanings it expresses, and with the reality to which it refers. This need is also understood by Valéry when he proceeds to describe the particular movements that take place within the context of poetic writing and leads to reflecting on the function and the dead ends of the use of poetic language. Starting from the reflection inherent in his literary texts and in the light of his experience as a poetic subject, Valéry puts forth a paradox. He likens poetry to a pendulum that moves from a sensation toward some idea or some feeling, returns toward some memory of the sensation, and toward the act which reproduces that sensation. This analysis is intended to show that the value of a poem lies in the inseparability of sound and sense, or in other words of “Voice” and “Thought”. However, it is a condition that seems to require the impossible. Although he argues that there is no relationship between sound and the sense of a word, the poet’s task, according to Valéry, is to provide a sense of the inner unity between the two, which is a “wonderful achievement.”

When Valéry points out the non-existence of a relation between “Voice” and “Thought” or else between “sound” and “the meaning of the word,” he is underlining the contingent relation among words, concepts and things they denote. However, he claims that it is the mission of poets to undertake through their art to try to establish a corresponding relationship and to create a sense of this “unbreakable unity” between “Voice” and “Thought.” Consequently, in the case of Valéry, the readers come to be recipients of a reflection on the literary experience itself, on the limits and possibilities of poetic language. In addition to the development of his theses in his theoretical works, his reflection appears and develops in a *symbolic* way in his poetic work. As he writes in the “*Young Fate*”: “In myself I renew my gods, my enigmas”. In this way, then, Valéry’s poetic writing becomes a field for exploring ideas and questions concerning literary creation and language.

### 3.3 Maurice Blanchot: and I'm barely myself anymore, but that's what it means to write

Maurice Blanchot's literary work is a prime example of self-referentiality and self-reflection. Literature is also an object of examination of his theoretical and critical work. From his earliest critical essays, Blanchot engaged, as Peter Pál Pelbart observes, with issues that many of his contemporaries have taken up after him: the necessary proximity between speech and silence, writing and death, work and erosion, literature and demolition, language and anonymous literary experience, and the breakdown of the writer (Pelbart 2007: 203). These themes recur in his literary texts and constitute the center around which each narrative is structured. In Blanchot's case, his literary texts become vehicles for the realization of his theoretical approaches and a space for the investigation of the experience of writing.

One of these texts is *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* (*The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*). It is a work that belongs to the narrative category of the *récit*, a subgenre of the French novel. The peculiarity of *récits* is that they give voice to the impossibility of the narrative itself, to the non-appearance of the events they strive to narrate (Hill 2012: 10). Most of the literary works Blanchot wrote in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, at the height of his literary production, belong to this literary genre. Despite their differences, these are first-person narratives that are largely concerned with literary language, writing, and more specifically, with writing themselves as *récits*. As such, the narrators are presented as writers who, by virtue of their status, are caught up in the process of their own depersonalization, and their self-elimination within the writing. In other words, the principal theme of Blanchot's *récits*, as we shall see regarding *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, is that working with language highlights an intermediate space for the narrative subject "between the self as the producer of words and the self as produced by words" (Mole 1997: 139).

In the case of *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, the simple narrative unfolds in the form of a conversation between the narrator and his estranged self. The narrator, locked inside his home, tries to overcome the distance between them through writing, but to no avail. He, the Companion, the Other, functions as a stranger that the narrative subject tries to reach out to, only to meet his withdrawal:

According to him, I came closest when I decided to write. He had taken a strange ascendancy over me in all these things, so that I had allowed myself to be persuaded that writing was the best way of making our relations bearable. I admit that for a while it was a pretty good way. But one day I realised that what I was writing was always more about him and, albeit indirectly, seemed to have no other purpose than to reflect him. This discovery struck me in the extreme. I saw in it what could paralyse me the most, not because I would henceforth try to escape this reflection, but because I would perhaps on the contrary make greater efforts to make it manifest. It was then that I clung to myself. I knew, but I didn't know precisely, that the ability to

say 'I' would allow me to better control my relationship with this reflection. However, the consequences for my life were disastrous. Not only did I have to give up what is called a normal life, but I lost control of my preferences. I also became afraid of words and wrote less and less, although the pressure inside me to write soon became dizzying.<sup>9</sup> (Blanchot 1953: 9–10)

Gradually we realize that there is only one character that is split into three others. They are the narrator, who speaks in the first person, his companion, who manifests himself only through words, and the ghost behind the window, who does not speak. The relationships between the three cases of the narrative are exclusively writing relations. We are dealing with a writing that seeks to recover itself in the present of its realization. The narrator wants to maintain this alteration of itself, to accentuate it rather than dissolve it, because he senses that this is the condition for the advent of writing. What is at stake is the passage from "I" to "he" within the narrative case (Majorel 2011: 201). The narrator in a moment of tension realizes the following:

[...] and I cannot conceive of breaking this circle, I cannot conceive of it since I belong to this circle, and I may, indeed, not write because I cannot do it and I am almost no longer myself, but that is what it means to write. (Blanchot 1953: 92)

*Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* is a "parable" of the writing process and the literary experience. The entire work functions as a self-referential and self-reflexive vortex that absorbs the readers into the spiral unfolding of repeated events. Blanchot does not construct this suffocatingly enclosed récit in order to convey explicitly his interpretation of literature as an existential experience, from which many questions arise concerning the meaning of concepts such as the work and, the author, and actions such as "reading" and "writing". Instead, his *sui generis* literary writing aims at illustrating and trying to elucidate these questions within its own practice. Hence, we would argue, in Blanchot's case, the reflective nature of literature is thematized and presented as a necessary condition for writing.

### 3.4 Clarice Lispector: [...] Writing is a query. It's this: ?

Clarice Lispector's *Um sopro de vida* (*The Breath of Life*) was published in 1978. This work is the Ukrainian-born Brazilian author's swan song. It is a text that is governed by her innovative and idiosyncratic writing. The plot of the work does not take conventional paths. We follow the thoughts of a writer and his conversations with the character he has just created, Angela Pralini. The narrator-writer, when writing about Angela Pralini, sees himself in front of an inverted mirror. Gradually, the heroine becomes self-aware and frees herself from the Author. The self-referential nature of this text is evident before Angela's appearance, from the first few pages where the Author reflects:

<sup>9</sup> The translation of all the passages from *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* is ours.

Does 'writing' exist in and of itself? No. It is merely the reflection of a thing that questions. I work with the unexpected. I write the way I do without knowing how and why—it's the fate of my voice. The timbre of my voice is me. Writing is a query. It's this: ?<sup>10</sup> (Lispector 2012: 14)

The Author informs us that the introduction to the book was written after its completion and its role is to alert readers to the specificity of the discussion that takes place in the following pages. Reflections on the nature of writing, lyrical outbursts, philosophical and theological musings, loneliness, and fear of death are some of the elements that constitute the main body of the narrative. The conversation that takes place between the Author and Angela does not have the typical form of question-and-answer sessions. There are very few passages in which the two give the impression that they are communicating. The Author himself wonders whether this is a dialogue or a double diary:

AUTHOR: Is this ultimately a dialogue or a double diary? I only know one thing: at this moment I'm writing: 'at this moment' is a rare thing because only sometimes do I step with both feet on the land of the present: usually one foot slides toward the past, the other slides toward the future. And I end up with nothing. Angela is my attempt to be two. Unfortunately, however, because of the way things are, we resemble one another and she too writes because the only thing I know anything about is the act of writing. (Lispector 2012: 29)

Elsewhere in the text, of course, the Author engages in a soliloquy and admits that Angela and he are his inner dialogue. This admission takes on the character of a motif that introduces the Author's thoughts about writing. He desires to steer towards a new kind of fiction, beyond good and bad, right and wrong. However, the theme that runs through the entire text, from warnings of the initial pages until Angela's presence fades at the end, is writing itself:

AUTHOR: What I'm writing now is meant for no one: it's directly meant for writing itself, this writing consumes writing. This, my book of the night, nourishes me with a cantabile melody. (Lispector 2012: 60)

*Um Sopro de vida* is an experimental text that functions as meta-fiction. With Angela's anti-heroic birth and presence, Lispector manages to express her reflection on the fine line between author and characters in a literary way. The Author, Angela, and the relationship between them constitute the proper ground for exploring the terms of artistic creation. Furthermore, through them, literature's ability to pose questions of an ontological nature is highlighted, by the means of constructing scenarios and imaginary situations concerning the authorial experience. Lispector's self-reflexive writing does not use arguments external to it, but by utilizing literary devices she shapes a work which reflects its own creation. We believe that texts such as *Um Sopro de*

<sup>10</sup> All extracts are taken from one of the latest English translation of Lispector's work published in 2012.

*vida*, can constitute an occasion for reinigorating the debate concerning the kind of knowledge that literature can offer. By studying how authors like Lispector explore and expand the boundaries and possibilities of literature, directly revealing the perspective of the author, we can draw conclusions about the authorial experience and the ways in which literature can produce thought, and raise queries concerning its own nature and its constitutive elements.

#### 4. *Concluding remarks*

We can now try to take stock by summarizing the results of our analysis and proceed to draw some tentative conclusions. Could we contend that we have obtained some form of knowledge from the study of the texts we have just referred to? What is it—if anything—that we have learned?

We would like to point out that the cognitive goals we may have attained by the thought experiments proposed to the reader by Mallarmé, Valéry, Blanchot and Lispector are distinctly philosophical in nature. Actually, we are dealing with *philosophical* literature par excellence and we have already alluded to the fact that our claims regarding the knowledge it may provide are bound to be controversial, at least as controversial as the conclusions of ambitious philosophical arguments.

Indeed, Mallarmé's conception of the negation of natural reality through his construal of the self-annihilating experience of literary writing, seems to sustain some peculiar metaphysical understanding of the work of the spirit and of its relation to the world. Valéry conveys essential insights about the attempt of literary creation to make possible a new poetic reality through the mysterious forging of an apparently impossible bond between language and thought. Blanchot and Lispector illustrate an essential dimension of the experience of self-conscious writing in the course of the construction of a literary work continuously wondering about its ontological constitution in which the reader is also invited to participate.

To be sure, all the above seem to be to an important extent aporetic, and the entire enterprise described through its actual enactment, may be regarded as somewhat frustrating. Hence, we may be tempted to talk about a kind of "negative" knowledge, leading to dead ends. And it may sound preposterous that we want to qualify as knowledge nihilistic conclusions about the ability of language to represent or express more or less familiar reality by leading to its ultimate negation. No wonder that many critics shall denounce the purport of such philosophical thought experiments as sterile and anti-humanist without any positive cognitive significance ("no humanly interesting content" in Lamarque and Olsen's words).

However, we do believe that we should recognize the importance of the study of texts of this kind, insofar as they help us understand the limits of the expressive potential of language, of our mental abilities

and of our opening to what we take to be the real world in which we find ourselves, and which we may partly negate and create ourselves. Moreover, all this is realized through some ineffable acquaintance with the experience of literary creation embodied in the self-referential writing of the kind we have tried to discuss.

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