

Inside Knowledge

Inside Knowledge:
(Un)doing Ways of Knowing in the Humanities

Edited by

Carolyn Birdsall, Maria Boletsi,
Itay Sapir and Pieter Verstraete

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P U B L I S H I N G

Inside Knowledge: (Un)doing Ways of Knowing in the Humanities,
Edited by Carolyn Birdsall, Maria Boletsi, Itay Sapir and Pieter Verstraete

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Cover design by Sefi Sinay

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INTRODUCTION

CAROLYN BIRDSALL, MARIA BOLETSI,
ITAY SAPIR AND PIETER VERSTRAETE

When we set out to organise a conference on the issue of knowledge in the humanities, we were curious about the kinds of responses we would receive.¹ If you ask scholars what kind of knowledge their research produces and how they would define knowledge in their respective disciplines, the reactions may include uncomfortable expressions, silences, unclear replies, scepticism or a reluctance to engage with the question. Some humanities scholars might even object to the suggestion that their research should aim at producing “knowledge.” The discomfort that the question of knowledge seems to generate in the humanities in fact enhanced our motivation for the necessity of such a conference and, later, of this volume. The overwhelming response to the “call for papers” for our 2007 conference “Inside Knowledge” was an unmistakable sign of the eagerness of the academic community to address this question. At the same time, the participants also expressed concerns about the nebulousness surrounding the term “knowledge,” especially in its use in the humanities.

Indeed, “knowledge” in the humanities is by no means a clearly defined concept, and even within the same discipline there is rarely consensus on the term’s meanings and applications. The roots of the ambiguous and precarious position of “knowledge” can be traced back to the traditional divide between the humanities and the natural sciences. In this divide—consolidated in the modern university system from the late

¹ The essays comprising this volume are based on a number of papers initially presented during the international conference “Inside Knowledge: (Un)doing Methodologies, Imagining Alternatives” held at the University of Amsterdam, March 28-30, 2007. This conference theme was inspired by the 2005-2006 Theory Seminar “Ways of Knowing,” organised by Mieke Bal at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). We want to extend our gratitude to ASCA for providing both these forums for academic exchange.

eighteenth century onwards—it was science that was supposed to hold the rights to knowledge production, with “knowledge” understood in terms of objectivity.² This divide was consolidated by the claim of hermeneutics that knowledge and explanation are the concern of the natural sciences,³ whereas meaning and interpretation are the domain of the humanities.³ The myth of objective knowledge has of course been debunked, particularly since Michel Foucault and poststructuralist thinkers have shown how knowledge production is inextricable from power and ideological mechanisms.⁴ The association of knowledge with objectivity, however, has not only been repudiated by the humanities. Recently, it has been questioned within the exact sciences as well, where pragmatist approaches are increasingly informing the epistemologies of scientific research.⁵

The humanities, however, still seem to nurture the idea that knowledge is the domain of science departments. Therefore, humanistic disciplines often do not consider their own undertakings to produce “knowledge” in this understanding of the term. The self-definition of the humanities remains, to some degree, grounded on the ongoing opposition between science (as pursuing “knowledge”) and the humanities (as searching for “meaning”). As a result, the term “knowledge” is, in certain ways, still set apart from the scope of the humanities, especially due to its association with science and objectivity. This would suggest a rather limited notion of knowledge in the humanities, defined in opposition to notions such as meaning, interpretation and understanding, which, as subjective categories, are supposed to better grasp the ideal of the humanities.

With this edited volume, we want to avoid the objectivist connotations

² See, for instance, Lee and Wallerstein, *Overcoming the Two Cultures*; Smith, *Scandalous Knowledge*; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Knowledge*.

³ Wilhelm Dilthey’s famous distinction between “*erklären*” (interpretative understanding) and “*verstehen*” (law-governed explanation) as the respective tasks of the humanities and sciences is perhaps the clearest formulation of this divide. See, for example, Dilthey, “Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie”; *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*; *Introduction to the Human Sciences*.

⁴ See, for instance, Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and The History of Sexuality*; and more recently, Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. For a concise summary of continental philosophy’s contribution to epistemological debates, see Dancy and Sosa, *A Companion to Epistemology*, 76-80.

⁵ For instance, see Latour, *Science in Action*; Pickering, *Science as Practice and Culture*; Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*; Megill, *Rethinking Objectivity*; and more recently, Hallyn, *Les structures rhétoriques de la science*; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*.

of “knowledge” as well as the subjective undertones in the concept of “meaning,” without perpetuating the kind of oppositional thinking that would compel us to choose one of the two as the ideal for the humanities. With this in mind, we propose the alternative formulation “ways of knowing,” which, in our view, excludes neither knowledge production nor meaning and interpretation from the agenda of the humanities. In this volume, we suggest that the humanities could benefit from a renewed, plural conception of knowledge that allows for different modes of knowing, yet also subjects them to constant critique.

The title *Inside Knowledge* is offered here as a starting point for discussion. Working as a scholar in a particular discipline could be perceived as having “inside knowledge” or being “inside” knowledge. This “being inside” can be interpreted as a comfort zone—the insider’s privileged position—or, on the other hand, as being trapped inside a knowledge system that excludes other ways of knowing. As the grammatical ambiguity of the phrase suggests, with “inside knowledge” we explore both options: knowledge as being an influential all-encompassing frame determining academic production, and scholars as agents in the deconstruction or unmaking of different epistemic frameworks.

The issues suggested by this volume’s title are complemented by the implications of the subtitle: *(Un)doing Ways of Knowing in the Humanities*. By introducing the term “knowing,” we seek to unpack ongoing conceptions of knowledge as a given, monolithic construct, or as a representation of an objective, unidimensional experience. Rather, knowledge is always filtered and mediated. It should not be conceived as a collection of “data,” but as an ongoing process. There are multiple ways of experiencing, perceiving or constructing knowledge. All the active components of these processes may be better captured by the present participle “knowing” than by the static noun “knowledge.” Moreover, if we think of ourselves as “doing” (or “undoing”), instead of “having,” knowledge, academic research only offers provisional stops, not fixed or permanent additions to a cumulative construct.⁶

Inside Knowledge therefore stresses a plural conception of knowledge, but also the value of bringing practices and theories of knowledge to the foreground. This volume also represents the engagement of humanities scholars in interdisciplinary reflections on knowledge and its modes of production. The contributors to this volume do not only adopt diverse disciplinary approaches, but also seek to interrogate the epistemological

⁶ See, for instance, Michel de Certeau’s articulation of a theory of practice along similar lines in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 61-75.

premises of their respective disciplines. Certain critics have noted that some “interdisciplinary projects” only involve a pastiche of objects and methods, without a synthetic approach.⁷ Given the challenges of “an age characterised by the loss of boundaries,” the ability to pay attention to the interrelatedness of objects and to place questions in a larger context is increasingly needed in academic research and practice.⁸ While interdisciplinarity can offer productive responses to these challenges, academics with interdisciplinary aspirations should also be mindful of the risks involved in such an undertaking.

Our book does not claim to be interdisciplinary just because each of its authors belongs to a different discipline. Indeed, the contributors to this volume come from backgrounds as diverse as comparative literature, theatre and performance studies, philosophy, art history, cultural studies and musicology. Despite their thematic and methodological diversity, however, the contributions share a common interest in addressing how knowledge figures in social and cultural discourses, cultural practices, disciplinary field(s) or discrete objects. In this way, the contributions to this volume draw on different theoretical and historical frames in order to critically probe issues that cannot be fully dealt with within the constraints of one discipline. The diversity of approaches to the topic of this volume constitutes an integral part of its objective to stage a productive encounter between different ways of knowing.

This volume includes three main orientations for revisiting the issue of knowledge in the humanities, although there are significant overlaps and points of intersection. Section I, “Tropes of Knowledge,” looks closely at a number of common tropes related to knowledge. Through a critical examination of these tropes, it exposes the shortcomings of dominant knowledge regimes and established disciplinary approaches in order to propose either new tropes or productive resignifications of existing ones. Section II, “Resisting Knowledge,” brings the task of “undoing” dominant paradigms of knowledge to the foreground. Each chapter in this section takes a case study that involves some form of resistance or challenge to dominant knowledge regimes or epistemological premises. The final section, “Displacing Knowledge,” picks up from the critical attitude that emerges when challenging normative understandings of knowledge. This section suggests that the question(ing) of knowledge and the resulting displacement of ideas influences the way we subsequently take a new position. The contributions to this section present the reader with

⁷ For objections to practices of interdisciplinarity, see, for example, Benson’s “Five Arguments Against Interdisciplinary Studies.” See also Newell 116.

⁸ Bal, *Traveling Concepts*, 4.

alternative models that, in different ways, trace knowledge as it enters historically altered theoretical grounds, to include the moving body, music performance, the senses and non-linguistic, affective modes of knowing.

Tropes of Knowledge

Thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and, later, Paul de Man have argued for the metaphorical nature of all language.⁹ Their ideas have changed the conception of tropological language not as a deviation from normal or “literal” language-use, but as language par excellence. An implication of this idea is that all language yields a precarious, ambivalent, unstable kind of knowledge, which never rests on any stable, “literal” ground. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson explored the practical ramifications of this idea to demonstrate that tropes, and metaphors in particular, are not just rhetorical devices.¹⁰ They are cognitive tools that shape our thought and experience, and determine our everyday practices. The social and cognitive functions of tropes, and their role in reinforcing regimes of knowledge and power, have not gone unnoticed by critics. However, what remains an under-theorised area is the potential contribution of tropes to envisioning alternative ways of knowing.

When employing a trope, we say something in terms of something else. In this act, two different frames of reference or narratives meet each other and can displace or imbue each other with foreign elements. In this sense, tropes move between the literal and the figurative, the known and the not-yet-known, the self and the other. Due to their in-between position, they can mobilise meanings and stage encounters between different discourses, languages and even modes of knowing. Tropes can be theoretically and epistemologically productive when they raise new issues and questions, and bring up challenging perspectives. Yet, they could also reinforce authoritative discourses or lead to dead ends and semantical obscurity.¹¹ The chapters in this section explore both the theoretical limitations and the epistemological potential of tropes related to knowledge.

This first section draws attention to a series of established tropes and exposes their ideological presuppositions. In Chapter One, Derek Attridge starts by posing the question: Can literary works or art works think, and

⁹ For example, see Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense” and de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*.

¹⁰ See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

¹¹ Bal, “Scared to Death,” 159.

even know? His intention is not so much to provide a definitive answer, but rather to draw attention to the possible implications of the question itself. He therefore explores what it means when the art work is personified as the “knower” than merely the “bearer” of knowledge. Attridge scrutinises tropes that ascribe consciousness and knowing capacities to works of art and literature. He does this by testing them on a wide range of works, from poems and novels to music and abstract painting. What is really at stake in such tropes, as Attridge argues, is the staging of our pursuit of knowledge. A literary work or art work stubbornly refuses to “satisfy the thirst for knowledge that it generates.” And yet, art works constantly engage with our epistemological desires and mobilise a never-ending process of discovering new ways of (not) knowing.

Chapters Two and Three revisit existing and overdetermined tropes. In Chapter Two, Begum Özden Firat takes us to the realm of visual art. Firat draws attention to the limitations of certain architectural tropes in visual theory, and proposes their replacement by other, more productive ones. More specifically, she tests the metaphor of the window in visual art, and demonstrates its inadequacy through a detailed comparison with the metaphor of the threshold. Through a close analysis of a seventeenth-century Ottoman miniature painting, she shows how this cultural object engages with the window-metaphor, but eventually inspires an alternative visual epistemology based on the threshold-metaphor. As opposed to an epistemology of transparency and visibility supported by the metaphor of the window, the threshold, Firat contends, inspires a way of knowing and looking that is “transitional, relational, opaque and precarious.” This unleashes the pleasure of opacity in the viewer, who is challenged to engage with the invisible aspects and the secrets of the image.

In Chapter Three, Maria Boletsi focuses on the trope of the barbarian and the concept of barbarism. She makes a case for the epistemological relevance of the barbarian, by relating this figure by definition to (not) knowing: the barbarian always suggests the unknowable, the unintelligible, the untranslatable. Contrary to a long history of negative uses of barbarism in its opposition to civilization, Boletsi proposes a resignification of barbarism and the barbarian as performative rather than ontological, essentialist categories. Through a reading of a scene in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Boletsi argues that barbarism can incite a “negative” operation of not-knowing, misunderstanding, or mistranslating. In this operation, barbarism can invade authoritative discourses and rupture their epistemological certainties with the challenge of the foreign. Barbarism is thereby introduced as a mode of (not) knowing that can take effect at sites of encounter between different

languages or discourses. This resignification aims at channelling the negativity of barbarism into productive (and, in that sense, “positive”) functions.

Chapters Four and Five explore the tension between the literal and figurative meanings of certain tropes related to falling and exhaustion. In Chapter Four, Michal Sapir looks at the epistemological aspects of physical falling in literary works, in order to propose an alternative physicality of knowledge. She reads Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* and Edgar Allan Poe’s detective tales, through which she introduces an alternative trope of knowledge “based on the physicality of the falling body.” The falling body, as it appears in such “disfigured” literary texts, points to the fundamental instability of the “reality” of human experience that literary language refers to. The epistemology inspired by these unstable bodies destabilises the unshakable grounds of the Cartesian trope of knowledge, typified by a detached human observer. But while falling bodies “in crisis” question the very possibility of such knowledge, they also become tools for the production of a kind of knowledge that captures better the experience of modernity.

In Chapter Five, Asja Szafranec starts with the Nietzschean allegory of the man who wanted to know the leech’s mind, in order to explore the relation of physical exhaustion to “exhaustive” knowledge. At the centre of her argumentation we find the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Szafranec explores Deleuze’s critique of the traditional notion of knowledge as representation, in its relation to an alternative process—“apprenticeship”—which makes knowledge possible through a more complex and intimate relation with reality. Deleuze’s apprenticeship is a necessary process that leads to the final stage of creation: the third synthesis. Here, Szafranec sheds light to one of the least understood parts of Deleuze’s philosophy, by exploring the parallel that Deleuze traces between the physiological exhaustion of Samuel Beckett’s characters and exhaustivity as the aim of genuine thought. This exhaustivity, in unifying being and thought, the passive and the active, takes the form of the “permutation of all possibilities,” which is also the outcome of Deleuze’s “third synthesis.”

Resisting Knowledge

In “Resisting Knowledge,” knowledge can be both the object and the subject of resistance. This section explores both paths that this grammatical ambiguity opens up. On the one hand, it is certainly our contention that a certain idea of knowledge, positivistic, objective or objectifying, needs to be resisted in its claim for universal validity as a

scholarly ideal. And an act of resistance is, perhaps, already triggered by this book's intention to investigate the presuppositions underpinning the pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, some of the articles in this section make the point that knowledge production is not necessarily the most important undertaking of a scholar in the humanities. Other articles explore cultural forms that are not simply resistant, but appear to be even indifferent to knowledge altogether. A number of the chapters here, implicitly or not, draw their strategies or tools of resistance from the example of oppositional fields of study, which ground their definition on their resisting stance to dominant regimes of knowledge. Anti- and postcolonialist discourse, gender and queer studies are cases in point here.

If knowledge becomes the grammatical subject in "Resisting Knowledge," however, new fields of inquiry emerge. For knowledge can also be understood as the agent of different forms of resistance. What if, instead of trying to resist knowledge, the scholar tried to resist conventional wisdoms, power structures and stultified methods with the help of new forms of knowledge? The issue goes well beyond an abstract, philosophical questioning: it is a call for experimenting with novel methodologies, based on new or revised epistemological premises. The articles in this section respond to this call, each in its own, necessarily provisional, way.

A kind of discourse often presumed to be resisting knowledge is poetry, which James Petterson explores in Chapter Six. This chapter outlines the double trap in poetry's knowledge-resisting potential: on the one hand, the instrumentalisation of poetic discourse, reducing it to its "content," and, on the other, the conception of poetry as an aesthetic practice altogether indifferent to questions of resistance, commitment and knowledge. This discussion significantly takes its cue from philosophers (Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou), philosophical writers (Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot) as well as a poet (Jacques Réda). Petterson reflects on meaning and sound, knowledge and materiality, and the complex ways in which poetry and philosophy resist and complement each other's epistemological claims.

Knowledge expressed in words and the issue of language are also at the centre of Jatin Wagle's case study in Chapter Seven. Theodor Adorno's exilic writing in the United States is presented as an example of how knowledge can be both an object of resistance and its most useful tool. Here, too, the specificities and techniques of writing condition the production of knowledge and the resistance to it. Wagle argues that, in prolonging his "intellectual exile," Adorno elaborated an epistemology of resistance to pervasive norms of knowledge production. Cultural alterity

and philosophical idiosyncrasy are thus deemed inseparable in this chapter, as the circumstances of Adorno's life are intermingled with the guiding ideas of his thought.

Chapter Eight involves not only words but also images, and, in particular, the ways in which both media, combined, enhance resistance to normative discourse. In her consideration of militarism in Israeli society, Noa Roei focuses on an exhibition of artistic representations of soldiers. Roei shows how the catalogue cover performs an act of epistemological questioning that exceeds the theoretical scope of the essays inside the catalogue. In particular, it is the paradox of subjectivation—the fact that one is always already acting within the norms of one's society, even while trying to resist precisely those norms—that is acknowledged and dealt with, both by the analysed object and in the self-reflexive position of the article itself.

A self-reflexive approach is also present in Chapter Nine, in Joshua Paul Dale's study of fetish parties—a type of event the author knows from first-hand experience. His is an inquiry “from within” in another sense: the knowledge at the centre of this chapter is not mediated by words or by artistic images, but principally through the physical and social presence of the body itself, both inside the fetish outfit and in its interaction with the other participants. These parties resist conventional social patterns of identity and difference by offering a form of interaction not based on knowledge of the other. The impact of this model on power and desire is the epicentre of Dale's analysis.

Displacing Knowledge

The title of the third and final section, “Displacing Knowledge” implies, on the one hand, that knowledge necessarily involves a placement of ideas and thoughts in concepts, epistemologies or disciplines, as governed by a certain cultural discourse. This placement particularly materialises in the ways that scholars position themselves towards what is shared as “known,” thereby contributing to leading approaches, epistemes and fashions in knowledge production. On the other hand, the act of resistance to those dominant paradigms, as discussed in Section II, results in a call for a displacement of knowledge, which would enable the scholar to take a distance and reflect upon *what* and *how* it is to know through academic research. This displacement suggests a repositioning towards the objects of knowledge, which sometimes requires a search for places outside the academia. We suggest that “displacing knowledge” is a conscious and

necessary movement outwards that scrutinises established positions and situates knowledge production outside “common-places.”

The chapters in this section each “displace” existing arguments, established theories and the contexts in which they are produced. These displacements aim at investigating the potential of alternative positions, the desire to know and the role of the location where “knowingness” comes to practise. In Chapter Ten, Steven Connor calls for a critical examination of a “going out of knowing” in relation to the objects we appropriate through knowing. Through a critique of phenomenology, he relates this exterior direction to intentionality and the desire of taking leave of our senses while being *inside* knowledge. Connor deconstructs the latter idea by considering the phrase “a stirring to meekness,” taken from a fourteenth-century text, which would hold a promise of another type of knowledge than the one that keeps us “inside.”

In Chapter Eleven, Kristin Becker discusses the historical ramifications of taking knowledge outside the academia through a late-nineteenth century case study: the Urania Institute in Berlin. In this project, scientific knowledge was taken outside the conventional places of academic knowledge production and popularised in various theatrical practices. As a significant precursor to today’s “edutainment,” the Urania presented a plethora of means of presenting scientific knowledge about the world through entertaining lectures and a “Scientific Theatre.” Becker proposes to look at the Urania project from two angles. Drawing on the framework of historical theatre and performance theories, on the one hand, she attempts to show how Urania’s spectacle of science can be studied in relation to the historical changes in the spectator’s attention. On the other hand, she shows how the emergence of a new “knowledge society” can be investigated through such popularising practices as the Urania project.

Hanna Järvinen, in Chapter Twelve, also addresses the historicity and cultural dependence of knowledge production, and relates it specifically to theoretical positions towards the dancing body. As a result of phenomenology’s overemphasis on the inside of the dancer’s movements through such concepts as “kinaesthesia” and “proprioception,” taken from nineteenth-century neurology, contemporary scholarship has produced a new essentialism and normativisation of a particular dance aesthetics. Järvinen proposes a historiographical approach that employs a genealogical frame to look at the reasons why the invention of “kinaesthesia” has contributed to new universalising truths about the sensation of dance. In doing so, she deconstructs existing discourses on dance, thereby reclaiming the historical specificity of the perception of movement by a moving subject.

In Chapter Thirteen, Dylan Robinson attempts to reassess both critical and experiential modes of knowing music for the purpose of an interdisciplinary musicology through practice-based research. Taking musicological research outside the academic context and into the performance space, he conceptualises musical meaning within the practice of Western art music as an active exchange of knowledge, based on a productive friction between audience members and performers. For this purpose, he re-evaluates the role of dialogue in giving the audience an increased agency. Through a case study of *Ligeti* (2005-2006), he illustrates how mixed-mode practice in music performance can help us rethink the audience in terms of its participation in creating both critical and embodied knowledge.

The last chapter of this section, rather than offering closure, emphatically posits the desire for knowledge as eternally deferred. In Chapter Fourteen, Tereza Havelková presents a case study of how contemporary opera stages the promise of a knowledge, which it knows it cannot fulfil. Through an analysis of Peter Greenaway's staging of Louis Andriessen's opera *Rosa* (1994), she demonstrates how the construction of opera can provoke the spectator's desire to search for knowledge, while simultaneously staging the impossibility of this knowledge. Taking Walter Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a departure point, she demonstrates the allegorical structure as a mechanism in opera for complicating the spectator's reading of the opera's signs. Havelková argues that *Rosa* performs a deconstructive reading of opera, which in its failure to offer closure, results in what de Man has called an "allegory of unreadability." Havelková ultimately relates this to the performative effects of opera's allegorical structure, which invites the listener to decipher the signs of the opera while forestalling the production of a univocal meaning.

By bringing together diverse approaches and objects, *Inside Knowledge* makes a case for an intersection of modes of knowing that do not just move past each other, but put each other to the test, often exposing their blind spots or underscoring their hidden potential. Staging encounters between heterogeneous objects and theoretical views in this collection does not only unveil interrelations and happy coincidences, but it sometimes also reveals the limitations of certain approaches, their problematic aspects and the hidden ideologies that they sustain. We would like to argue that from this latter process productive insights can emerge too. The encounters among discourses and cultural objects in this volume do not aim to pin down the meaning and uses of "knowledge," but the

exact opposite: questioning the fixity of knowledge as a concept and revealing its potential as an ongoing practice. The chapters in this volume ultimately dare to envision the future of our various disciplines through different ways of knowing. By probing an issue from different angles and exploring its implications across diverse media and discourses, this volume could lead to another kind of understanding of its complexity. The question of “knowing” in the humanities is fascinating exactly because it is mobile, complex, and even controversial. It concerns all scholars in the humanities, and this makes it, by definition, an interdisciplinary question.

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SECTION I:

TROPES OF KNOWLEDGE

ON KNOWING WORKS OF ART¹

DEREK ATTRIDGE

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.
—Elizabeth Bishop

I

Do literary works think? Can works of art know? Several recent theoretical discussions of literature have tried to capture a particular quality of the literary work by ascribing to it the capacity to *think*. Pierre Macherey's *A quoi pense la littérature?* was published in 1990, and although the 1995 English translation preferred the title *The Object of Literature*, the introductory chapter preserved the original question, "What is literature thinking about?" In 1992, a large conference was sponsored by *Le Monde*, the University of Maine, and the town of Le Mans, to consider the question "L'art est-il une connaissance?"; one of the speakers was Alain Badiou, who entitled his talk, "Que pense le poème?"² And in 2003 Stathis Gourgouris published a book entitled *Does Literature Think?*³

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in *Anglo-Saxónica*, the journal of the Centre for English Studies of the University of Lisbon.

² Badiou, "Que pense le poème?" In spite of the similar title, Badiou's essay "Qu'est-ce que la littérature pense? (Literary Thinking)" bears no resemblance to this essay; in it he claims—to my mind unhelpfully—that "what literature thinks is both a real marked in language with the seal of the One, and the conditions governing the way that real is marked" (38).

³ It is quite striking that this string of titles associating literature with thinking returns again and again to the form of the *question*—perhaps echoing Heidegger's questioning title about thinking itself, *Was heisst Denken*. Heidegger's text, which has been translated into English as *What is Called Thinking?* but also "What Calls for Thinking?" (in *Basic Writings*), is a set of lectures given in 1951 and 1952 in

What I am interested in is the implicit personification in these titles: rather than describing the work as the product or embodiment of thought, or as a spur to thought, something about the experience of reading leads the theorist or critic to ascribe to the work *itself* the ability to think. Although the personification in the title is not always carried through consistently in the discussion that follows (Macherey, for instance, is interested in literature as a mode of philosophy, Gourgouris in literature as a mode of what he calls “mythic thought”), it suggests that, at least for the duration of the reading, we may respond to a series of words as if they had something like human consciousness. Gourgouris elaborates on the question he wishes to address in his book as follows:

The more challenging point is not to determine *what* literature thinks (what is its cognitive object), but *how* literature thinks—what is the process by which literature might provide us with access to knowledge and what sort of knowledge this might be.⁴

Clearly, the notion that the work of literature thinks is related to the idea that it *knows*. The question of art and knowledge, and its close relative, the question of art and truth, of course go back a long way—even further back than the time of Plato’s Socrates, who refers to the *ancient* quarrel between poetry and philosophy, perhaps even further back than Hesiod, whose Muses (in the *Theogony*) describe themselves as tellers of lies that seem true as well as purveyors of real truths. But the more specific notion of the artwork as itself the knower, rather than merely the bearer of knowledge, is perhaps a more recent one, and raises rather different questions.

Someone who engagingly teases out a number of the implications of such a conception of the work of literature is Michael Wood, in his 2005 study *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*. At the outset of his book, Wood offers what he calls a rather schematic frame for his enterprise:

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

which he closely associates thinking—in the sense he wishes to promote—and poetry. Although one can imagine all these titles as statements, their interrogative form suggests that the question of literature and thinking *is* a question, and perhaps too that thinking as it happens in literature is never far from questioning.

⁴ Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?*, 1-2.

knows and perhaps will not tell us directly, or what it knows that only novels know, or only this novel knows.⁵

Wood goes on: “Many see dangers in such a personification—the novel is not a person and can’t know anything, only novelists and readers can” (and one might perhaps add narrators and characters), but he wants “this form of the question...just to hang in the air.”⁶ When, later in the book, he mentions again those who have resisted the notion that literature can know—“a number of friends and colleagues with whom I have discussed the subject of this book have objected strenuously to my use of personification”—he offers a justification for its use.⁷ To sketch his argument baldly: it reminds us that literature can mean something quite different from what the author meant; that its form is what makes it literature; and that reading literature is an act of creation—all of which I happily endorse.⁸ And he sums up: “What literature knows, what a novel or poem or play knows, is strictly, unfiguratively, what I now know that I didn’t know before I read the text.”⁹ Here I part company with Wood, as will become evident.

Wood is able to use the multiple suggestiveness of his primary metaphor to provide some acute readings of literary works and to set going a number of intriguing trains of thought. But does his justification of the metaphor fully explain the temptation it seems to hold out to literary theorists?¹⁰ Since we can’t take these formulations literally, we have to ask what work the anthropomorphism is doing in these accounts. What is it about one’s experience of a work of literature that might lead one to consider—if only through the suspension of disbelief—that the verbal object before one is capable of thinking and knowing? And is it a defining characteristic of the literary work or a property of certain works only? Are there literary works that seem to think or know nothing, or completely to lack the capacity to think or know?

It is clear that the issue here is not one of *agency*: there seems to be no problem about ascribing to works of literature (or the other arts) a whole series of purposive acts. Flicking through F.R. Leavis’ critical works, for

⁵ Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰ Angela Leighton is another who is drawn to the trope: “For all their powers of memory and invocation, and in spite of the binding force of their rhymes, these elegies know that there is nothing else” (*On Form*, 226).

example, one discovers that a poem can *offer*, *register*, *convey*, *impose*, *demand*, *pull itself up*, *recognise*, *settle into* and *pick up*.¹¹ We are quite happy to say that a novel *resists* interpretation, or *reinforces* conventions, or *undermines* beliefs. A sculpture can *intimidate*, or *entertain*, or *shock*. Yet there are acts that we would hesitate to associate with a work of art. Would it not raise eyebrows if a colleague said, “this stanza feels profound grief”? (This would be different from observing that it feels *overloaded* with emotion, say, where it is the reader who is doing the feeling). Could we accept assertions that artworks *imagine*, or *consider*, or *remember*? All such terms imply a metaphorical leap that, at the very least, makes us pause. The difference seems to be that in these cases, unlike *register*, *resist* and so on, the metaphor implies consciousness and mental effort rather than just agency: the work is deemed to possess a subjectivity than enables it to do things that normally only humans (or in some cases humans and animals) are capable of. After all, a desk can resist my efforts to move it, a car can demand attention, an argument can undermine one’s assumptions. A borderline case, perhaps, is Leavis’ *recognise*: poets may recognise, but can poems? Of course writers themselves, and the characters or speakers in their works, may do all these things with impunity, and many critics take care to restrict their use of words suggestive of human subjectivity to these individuals, real or fictional; but my interest is in the ascription of such terms—and in particular words suggestive of thinking and knowing—to the works themselves.

Let’s take a poem, by Jeremy Prynne, that we might be tempted to say “knows”:

Retail Count

The glass rises half-dark and tilts over
to the child’s arm refracted in a white
bandage. Fret the dust of light he
shrinks into case 24 doz and is
projected

star-bursts avail him
nightly and by mute signs,
lips sutured together as to keep
the pearl from the discount. The
picklock shimmers. Limbs pass
through the maze. The monitor
locks on to a vale acted until

¹¹ These verbs can be found in Leavis’ essays in *New Bearings in English Poetry* and *A Selection from Scrutiny*.

hit and lost in silt, tuning into
the peak signal the piper plays:

(a) The triangular sling ascends and
anomalous standing-waves compose
the trihedron of geodetic base vectors.

(b) Half mute the torsion song mounts
under glass, against it the girl presses.

So by the linden tree he sweetly leans,
the white vale is full. The arm is sung
by cataract, white sound, white blood,
white light locked in the carotid.¹²

Not only might we say, were we given to personification, that this poem knows, we might want to call it a “knowing” poem: by which we would mean it seems to harbour some secret knowledge, revealing only that it, and not the reader, is privy to the secret. Only the poem knows, we might want to say, what sort of glass it speaks of, whose limbs pass through the maze, how a cataract can sing an arm. It is not a matter of trying to fathom an authorial meaning: it seems pretty certain that if we cornered Jeremy Prynne and demanded answers to our questions, he would not be able to give them—or if he did, his answers would need further interpretation on our part. If the poem gives pleasure to us, it is in its refusal to answer these questions, in the activity of guessing and testing and shaping we are encouraged to engage in.

The idea of the art work having the capacity to know is not limited to accounts of literature. Michael Wood’s inspiration, in *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, comes in part from an earlier book, Peter de Bolla’s *Art Matters*, a study in which de Bolla takes up the challenge of finding appropriate language in which to articulate the experience of a powerful work of art. He concentrates on three such works: William Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven,” Glenn Gould’s 1981 performance of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Barnett Newman’s painting in the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. It is in relation to the last of these that de Bolla asks what Wood calls “the truly haunting question”: “What does this painting know?”¹³

¹² Prynne, *Poems*, 189 (from the sequence *Into the Day*, 1972). Reprinted by permission of the author.

¹³ Quoted in Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, 8.

It may seem a surprising way to describe an abstract work of art, but one must respect the honesty with which de Bolla attempts to capture his own experience of standing in front of this painting. Figure 1.1 shows the painting, though it gives no sense of its size. Figure 1.2 is a photograph of Newman, with Jackson Pollock and Tony Smith, sitting next to *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* at Newman's exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, 1951; some sense of the huge scale of the painting comes across from this image.

De Bolla gives a lengthy and subtle account of his response to this work; I'll focus, however, on his summary of the issue of knowing:

Once again I am prompted to ask: What does this artwork know? I phrase this question in full light of the fact that it is virtually unintelligible—it might be slightly better to recast the question as, “What is its way of knowing?”—but this does not detract from the very powerful sense I have of getting closer to the work, closer yet still not close enough. This leaves me with the virtual impression of a depth to the work, of something contained within it that I have yet to fathom, a space I may, perhaps, never inhabit.¹⁴

Again, then, we have the impression of a secret being guarded by the work, a secret that resists any amount of looking, and one to which the artist cannot be expected to have privileged access. It is, in every sense, for de Bolla, a knowing work of art.

Some works of art, then, might be called “knowing” in that they convey a sense of meaningfulness without that meaning being entirely graspable.¹⁵ We can all think of many works of art—at least visual and verbal works—that would qualify for this adjective; most of them probably modern or postmodern examples, though not necessarily so: earlier examples might include William Shakespeare's strange poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” or Goya's baffling *Los Caprichos*.¹⁶ How

¹⁴ De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 52.

¹⁵ This is very different from the work of art in which we sense a knowing mind behind the mind we are presented with—as in the case of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues: in such examples, and related examples of dramatic irony, we share in the creator's knowingness. We are knowing; the poor narrator is ignorant.

¹⁶ I am not sure I can come up with any wordless musical works that deserve the adjective; de Bolla does not endow Bach's *Goldberg Variations* themselves with the capacity to know, although he does say that Gould's performance, recorded in 1981, “can be understood as a philosophical argument” (90).