

# Literature's Contributions to Scientific Knowledge



# Literature's Contributions to Scientific Knowledge:

*How Novels Explored New Ideas  
about Human Nature*

By

Dario Maestriperi

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## CHAPTER ONE

# SCIENCE AND LITERATURE: INTRODUCTION

The view of literature that emerged from French post-modernist philosophy in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has now become popular in the field of literary studies also in the US, is that since literature is produced by language, and language is produced by human beings, literature necessarily reflects the content of the individual minds that express themselves through language, and such content mainly consists of concerns about gender and sexuality, power, morality, or more broadly, culture. In this view, literary works do not represent any reality that exists outside of the minds that produce the literary work and/or independently of the language with which the literary work is produced. Language and literature cannot refer to anything real, anything beyond themselves, just as human beings cannot access any knowledge of anything beyond themselves. Nothing produced by language can operate outside the boundaries of language, and since literature cannot refer to anything ‘external’, it can only refer to itself, to other literature. This view of literature as self-referential denies the legitimacy of any issues of realism, representation, knowledge, or truth, which may be raised in relation to literature.

Not everyone subscribes to the post-modern view of literature. There is a much older and broader tradition that views literature as a representation of reality (literature as ‘mimesis’; Auerbach 1953), and particularly as a tool for exploring and explaining the human condition and the world, and for getting us closer to the ‘truth’. The question of whether and how art can produce knowledge and truth has occupied artists and philosophers for thousands of years. This question has recently become more focused on the specific cognitive mechanisms and processes through which literary fiction can produce knowledge as well as on the evolutionary significance of knowledge production through literature.

Thus, the debate about the cognitive value of literature (in addition to its aesthetic and social value) that traditionally concerned philosophers, literary

scholars, and the writers themselves, has now been expanded to include cognitive scientists and evolutionary behavioral scientists.

### **The current debate about the cognitive value of literature**

Cognitive scientists and philosophers of literature who embrace 'literary cognitivism' have emphasized the cognitive benefits gained by readers who engage with literary fiction. There is a growing body of evidence showing that reading works of literature improves imagination, enhances social-cognitive skills particularly with regard to theory of mind, provides novel opportunities for perspective-taking (e.g., it allows us to discover what we would think or feel if we were in another's shoes) and increases empathy and sympathy towards others, as well as moral reasoning (Kidd & Castano 2013; Willems & Jacobs 2016).

Related to the notion that literature can help us see another's perspective is the suggestion that the cognitive significance of literature is to help us understand what it is like to engage in a particular activity, vicariously, through the characters of the fiction. The idea here is that literary fiction is a form of virtual reality, in which imaginary events and actions can trigger real psychological, emotional, or behavioral responses. Evolution-oriented cognitive psychologists such as Steven Pinker have argued readers of literary fiction acquire or practice cognitive skills in the literary virtual environment, the way players of video games based on virtual reality acquire or practice skills involving perception, perception-action coordination, and decision-making (Pinker 1997). He and others have argued that these cognitive benefits are adaptive and probably explain the evolution of the human tendency to create and enjoy literature. Some philosophers of literature, instead, have argued that engaging in literary 'virtual reality' allows readers to gain some 'understanding' of this virtual reality itself and how it is generated by sources external to the individual.

For example, philosopher Dorothy Walsh has argue that the cognitive value of literature is not to enhance factual knowledge ('knowledge *that*') or procedural knowledge (knowledge '*how*'), but subjective experiences such as '*knowing what*' it is like to, for example, fall suddenly into poverty, lose a child to death, or undergo religious conversion (Walsh 1969). According to Walsh, through reading fiction a person may acquire "*knowledge in the form of realization; the realization of what anything might come to as a form of lived experience*" (Walsh 1969, p. 136). Similar to this, others have argued that literature and art in general provide 'intuitive' knowledge or 'knowledge of essences' (Wood 2005). Although many versions of this idea



have been proposed, what all of them have in common is that they seem to imply that literature does not provide real knowledge (for example, factual or conceptual knowledge), but some form of ‘understanding’. Having the experience of something, or living through someone else’s vicarious experience – it has been argued - may be related to knowledge but does not in itself constitute knowledge (Wood 2005).

This viewpoint has been articulated in detail by another philosopher of literature, John Gibson, who has recognized that the benefits advocated by literary cognitivism may be genuine but also argued that they tend to say too much about the readers of literature (for example, how readers might improve in their cognition, emotion, or reasoning) and too little about the literary work in itself (Gibson 2009). Gibson argued that if the main benefits of literature are about the readers, the cognitive value of literature is weak, or at best indirect or derivative, because the readers do all the cognitive effort while the literary work in itself does little or nothing at all. Gibson acknowledged that “*works of fiction can embody a vision of aspects of human experience and circumstance: Bartleby the Scrivener is among the most potent representations we have of alienation, Othello of jealousy. But visions are, from the epistemic point of view, just that: mere pictures, representations of life that are often powerful, moving, even beautiful, but for all that cognitively neutral. Thus something outside the work must be invoked to build the bridge between these visions and worldly truth. But the moment we look outside the work to build this bridge, we have implicitly conceded the defeat of literary cognitivism*” (Gibson 2009, p. 9).

Similar to other philosophers of literature, Gibson has argued that literature does not embody conceptual knowledge, expressed as a set of propositions about the nature of some aspect of our world, or offer factual knowledge or statements about the truth. Similar to Walsh and others, Gibson’s view is that the cognitive value of literature is to provide some form of understanding rather than knowledge. Specifically, he argued that literature increases our ‘cultural understanding’ of the world around us, which in his view, means the understanding of the cultural meaning people attribute to facts or events; the way facts or events are subjectively interpreted and ‘value’ is attributed to them, for example, in terms of their cultural or moral significance. Gibson differentiates his position from that of the literary cognitivists in that he believes that the cognitive value of literature – the facilitation of cultural understanding – resides in the literary work itself and not in its effects on the readers. He concedes, however, that while literature does not offer any knowledge, it acts on knowledge that readers already possess, thus coming close to the position of the literary cognitivists.

Another skeptic about the cognitive value of literature is philosopher Catherine Wilson (1983), who in discussing Morris Weitz's (1943) claim that Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* "reveals a truth about the world which has not been revealed by any other novelist, sociologist...", argued that his claim is vitiated by an important ambiguity: *If Weitz means that no sociologist and no philosopher could, in principle, establish this conclusion because of the inherent limitations of sociology and philosophy as disciplines, one is left wondering what sort of truth it is which is established neither by empirical observation nor by reasoning from a set of established or immediately plausible assumptions. If, on the other hand, Weitz means that Richard Wright has already anticipated what sociology or philosophy can, and so eventually will reveal, one is justified in wondering what the difference is between anticipation of this sort and mere conjecture*" (Wilson 1983, p. 490).

With regard to the issue of what sort of truth (or knowledge) may be provided by literature, '*which is established neither by empirical observation nor by reasoning from a set of established or immediately plausible assumptions*', one could argue that literature can provide wisdom, which is a form of truth or knowledge that generally cannot be established directly by empirical observation or by other traditional means of scientific or philosophical inquiry. For example, folk tales and fairy tales, just like proverbs, can convey wisdom about how to interpret the behavior of human beings and the situations they find themselves in as well as how to make optimal decisions about them (e.g. Mieder 2008). Such wisdom, in turn, is based on some knowledge of universal aspects of human nature, predictable situations occurring in human lives, or recurring characteristics of the world, which is also presented and illustrated in folk or fairy tales (e.g. Ackoff 1989).

Wilson's second objection is that if literature can anticipate what sociology or philosophy can, and eventually will reveal, there is little value in an anticipation of this sort, as it amounts to mere conjecture. One could argue that since much of the content of literature is 'human nature', or the 'human condition', or the 'human experience', it is likely that if literature can anticipate some knowledge, it will likely be in the domain of behavioral scientific disciplines that focus on the human mind and human behavior, such as psychology, ethology, or economics, rather than sociology or philosophy. Moreover, what Wilson dismisses as worthless 'mere conjecture' may be what other people call scientific theories or hypotheses.

## **The role of ideas in the generation of new knowledge in science and literature**

Scientific theories are fictional narratives about how the world works. For example, theories in psychology are fictional narratives about how psychological processes (e.g., perceptions, emotions, motivation, beliefs, etc.) and/or behavioral processes (e.g. competitive or cooperative relationships between individuals, romantic or sexual relationships, status-related relationships, etc.) operate. The formulation of theories is a crucial step in the process of knowledge production in the sciences. Although a scientific theory may be “a mere conjecture”, the theory is an integral part of the process of knowledge formation. Scientific knowledge does not spring automatically from observations, experimental data, or argumentation. Scientific inquiry is a creative process in which ideas play a fundamental role in the process of knowledge formation. Although a theory is not itself knowledge, a theory can lead to the production of knowledge by observation, experimentation, or any other traditional means of empirical scientific inquiry. Darwin’s theory of biological evolution by natural selection anticipated and led to a great deal of knowledge about the natural world, and continues to do so more than one hundred years after it was formulated. Many aspects of the theory were a ‘mere conjecture’. For example, Darwin hypothesized a hereditary mechanism at the basis of biological evolution without knowing anything about the existence of genes.

One need not be a scientist to have a theory about how the world works. Not everyone can formulate theories about processes in physics, chemistry, or biology, but in principle any human being with normal cognitive abilities can formulate a theory about how the human mind or human behavior works. The authors of literary fiction are often well positioned to formulate theories of human nature. They often have a great capacity for introspection as well as for observation of other people and their behavior. Although they may not have academic training in scientific psychology, their knowledge of classical literature puts them in a good position for developing new and original insights into human nature. Given that writers’ favorite mode of expression is literary, writers may formulate and present theories of human nature in the form of novels, plays, or poems.

Theories in science can be grounded in observations and data as well as include logical reasoning and intuition, but so can theories in literature. Just as hypotheses and predictions can be extracted from scientific theories, so they can be extracted from ideas conveyed in literature. If a work of literary fiction presents the author’s theory about human nature, then the only

difference between that and a theory of human nature formulated by a psychologist is that the former is expressed through fiction while the latter through propositional statements.

Gibson (2009) noted that in literature “*We also notice a conspicuous absence of all those tools, devices, and techniques we commonly take to be essential to the search for truth and knowledge: argumentation, the offering of evidence, the setting forth of ‘the facts’, the proffering of premises, the derivation of conclusions, and so on...*” (p. 1). Gibson also pointed out that “*Literature standardly constructs fictional narratives that have dramatic structures; works of inquiry standardly attempt to construct factual narratives that have argumentative (or evidentiary) structures. This would seem an important difference. And the challenge is to show that literary works can have a claim to cognitive value in the absence of those features of writing commonly taken to be the stuff of the pursuit of knowledge*” (Gibson 2009 p. 2).

It may be argued, however, that in the process of scientific inquiry, fictional narratives (in the form of scientific theories) are just as important as factual narratives. As for the difference between dramatic (in literature) vs argumentative (in philosophy) or evidentiary (in science) structures, this is not an important one. For example, whether fictional narratives about how the world works are presented as stories with a dramatic structure or as propositional statements with an argumentative or evidentiary structure, in both cases these fictional narratives contain some elements of reality (some knowledge previously acquired) and some elements of speculation. The form, or structure, in which the theories are presented is not crucial. For example, Darwin could have presented and illustrated his theory of evolution by natural selection through a novel with many characters and their dramatic vicissitudes across generations (it has been argued that George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* is something akin to this; Carroll 1995).

The current sharp distinction between literary and scientific language is a relatively recent phenomenon that arose in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, scientific prose was often also literary. Before the 1950s, it was also not unusual for novelists and poets to use literary writing as an epistemological tool to propose and explore new ideas about the human condition or the world. There was, in fact, a long tradition of thinking in German culture, which can be traced back to the philosophy of the Romantic movement and the work of Friedrich Schelling and Wolfgang Goethe, which viewed literary explorations of nature as having great epistemological value and complementing those conducted by the sciences.

Following the spread of Darwinism, humankind was increasingly viewed as an integral part of nature, therefore, the complementarity of literary and scientific investigations of the natural world was gradually expanded to include the investigation of the human condition and human nature.

### **Historical perspective on science and literature: from Goethe to the Darwinian novelists**

A fundamental organizing principle in the philosophy of the Romantics was the notion of the complementarity of the literary and the scientific conceptions of nature. The literary conception of nature included the ideas that aesthetic intuition could provide a means to understand the fundamental organization of the natural world, and that the natural world and its organizing structures could be represented artistically, for example, through poetry or literary prose. Friedrich Schelling and Wolfgang Goethe believed that both art and science require the creative play of the imagination and that they provide complementary approaches to reaching the same essential foundations of nature. From Spinoza, they derived the principle that one can grasp the essential idea of any natural phenomenon in an intuition, and that self and nature are intimately related, so that discoveries about one would lead to revelations about the other. Although Goethe was well aware of the important methodological differences between the literary and the scientific explorations of nature, he nevertheless believed that scientific understanding and artistic intuition reflected complementary modes of penetrating to nature's underlying laws.

The historian of science Robert Richards has argued that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection had its roots in romantic philosophy and in the ideas of Goethe (Richards 2002). More importantly Darwinism paved the way for expanding the Romantics' artistic-scientific exploration of the natural world to include humankind, and particularly the human mind and human behavior. With the publication of "*On The Origins of Species*" in 1859, Darwin provided the first comprehensive, all-encompassing (and correct) explanation for the origin and diversification of life on Earth. From the earliest formulations of his theory, Darwin was convinced that the human species was the product of the same evolutionary processes that produced all other species. Humans occupied a particular branch of the tree of life, and derived from a larger branch from which all other primates also derived. Darwin explicitly extended his theory of evolution to human beings in two subsequent books, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*" (1871), and "*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*"

(1872), in which not only did he clarify the evolutionary roots of the human species but also explained the evolutionary origins of many aspects of human behavior. From Darwin's perspective, the human mind was a biological organ that evolved just like other organs in our body, and mental and behavioral processes could be explained through evolution just like physical or physiological traits. Darwin explained that humans are animals and that universal aspects of human mental and behavioral processes – what we call human nature – shared many characteristics with aspects of mind and behavior in other primates, and other animals as well.

Darwin thus solved scientifically the mysteries of life, human existence, and human nature that other scientists, philosophers, artists, and thinkers had struggled with for thousands of years. By showing that human nature is in part the result of inheritance from our primate ancestors and in part the result of adaptation to the environment through natural selection, Darwin provided the conceptual foundations for future research in the behavioral and the social sciences. The behavioral and the social sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology, behavioral biology, psychiatry), however, did not bite the bullet for a long time. For various historical and contingent reasons, Darwin's ideas were ignored during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up to the 1960s (Richards 1987).

Darwin, however, inspired many other intellectuals – scientists and non-scientists alike – to attempt to explain and understand human thinking and human behavior from an evolutionary perspective. Already before Darwin's publication of *The Descent of Man*, others had immediately grasped the implications of evolutionary theory for the human species. The British biologist Thomas Huxley pointed to the extreme similarity between human anatomy and that of the great apes in his book *Man's Place in Nature* (1863). He also went on to discuss the evolution of human behavior and human intelligence. Similarly, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel gave a lecture in 1863, in which he applied the concept of natural selection to human cultural and social history (Richards 2008). He developed the concept of human evolution more extensively in two lectures he gave in 1865 and in the two brief chapters about human evolution in his book *Generelle Morphologie* (1866). Haeckel was a lot less cautious than Darwin in describing natural selection as a 'struggle for survival'. In his *General Morphology*, he wrote: "*The struggle for existence or the struggle for life — the contest for the wants and needs of life, perhaps more accurately — is one of the greatest and most powerful laws of nature that rules all organisms, including the human world*" (cited in Richards 2008). Haeckel, like Darwin, believed that animal mentality differed from human mentality

only in degree, not in kind. He brought this question to the fore in a popular science book he wrote, which was later translated into English with the title of *The History of Creation* (Haeckel 1868).

Thanks to the writings and lectures of enthusiastic Darwinians like Huxley and Haeckel, Darwinism spread among intellectuals and also in popular culture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that many references to evolution appeared in newspapers, magazines, novels, plays, and films. German-speaking countries were exposed to Darwinism mainly through Haeckel's work. The popularization of Darwin's theory presented novelists with this shocking news: human beings are animals engaged in a 'struggle for survival'. And just like other animals, we can be extremely selfish, competitive, exploitative, and outright cruel when we interact with other human beings. While psychologists and other behavioral and social scientists were not paying attention, the implications of Darwinism for understanding human thinking and human behavior were fully absorbed by some novelists. Literary fiction has traditionally represented, explored, and investigated what is referred to as 'the human condition', or 'the human experience', or what it means to be human. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, novels involved a well-structured narration of facts or of social relationships, but without a science-informed exploration of the underlying psychological processes. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, novels became more psychological and introspective, bringing readers into the minds of the characters and exploring their thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories. Well-known examples of this are the novels by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Knut Hamsun, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, among others.

It was mainly within German literary culture that this renewed interest in human psychology was accompanied by clear epistemological goals and expressed in relation to a broader philosophical view of the world. Darwinism provided German writers with a new scientific framework that could be applied to the entirety of the natural world, and that could also encompass humans and allow for a science-informed exploration of their minds and their behavior. Darwinism, however, was often absorbed by novelists, not in isolation but in conjunction with the philosophical ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson. The synthesis of Darwin and Schopenhauer, interestingly, was a unique phenomenon limited to literature, which did not occur in philosophy or in science. Darwin himself was not directly familiar with Schopenhauer and never mentioned him, while Schopenhauer was indirectly acquainted with Darwinian theory, but didn't think much of it.

Many German-speaking novelists who were active in the period across the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were highly intelligent, erudite, knowledgeable, and ambitious intellectuals whose work was informed by deep philosophical, scientific, and artistic knowledge and who felt they had an important role in society and mission to fulfill: to generate new knowledge and understanding, to inform and guide social, moral, and political activities, and to contribute to the improvement of humankind. They were driven by the scientific goal of enhancing the understanding of human nature and committed to using their literary fiction to explore uncharted areas of the human mind and human behavior with their intuitions, insights, and in some cases, even hypotheses. Some novelists had a social reform agenda: to warn humankind about the perils of the dark side of human nature and contribute to humankind's intellectual, moral, and spiritual elevation in line with the values of the Enlightenment. Others instead took a more personal and existential perspective. Since the Darwinian view of human nature directly challenged the novelists' view of themselves, a lot of 'Darwinian' literary fiction written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was autobiographical and emotionally charged. A typical example is a novel in which the protagonist is an intellectual who has come to accept that human affairs and human relationships are regulated by the needs, desires, and constraints of human nature. The intellectual refuses to let his instincts be in the driver seat and refuses to play the games of human nature. The knowledge and awareness of how human beings operate, along with the intellectual's highly sensitive spirit cultivated by an extensive humanistic education, generate a feeling of rejection and auto-exclusion from human social affairs, or an attempt to engage with them but with the guide of strong intellectual and moral principles. The typical tale involves the intellectual's frustration at his inability to engage with his social world and mostly his inability to control the demons of his own human nature. As the protagonist painfully discovers that his own human nature is stronger than his intellectual education, artistic sensitivity, and moral principles, he must acknowledge defeat – his own mind and behavior are driven by animalistic impulses as everyone else's – and in some cases the only option available to express rejection of life and acknowledge defeat is suicide.

In this book I examine three European novelists who, perhaps more than anybody else, embodied the writers' attempts to use Darwinism and literary fiction to explore and illustrate new aspects of human nature: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Italo Svevo, and Elias Canetti. Von Sacher-Masoch and Canetti were highly ambitious intellectuals who were driven by a social reform agenda and set out grandiose plans. Canetti, however, at least early in his literary career, also wrote his fiction for deeply personal and



existential reasons, related to the issues of human nature and free will. Similar pressing personal and existential issues also drove Italo Svevo and guided much of his literary work. Whether these three novelists wrote fiction about human nature with an agenda for social reform in mind or for more personal existential reasons, in all cases they did it with the belief that new knowledge about human nature could help their cause and that their fiction could contribute to such knowledge by presenting and exploring new ideas. All of them operated within the conceptual framework of the complementarity of science and literature advanced by Goethe and the other romantics, and all of them chose Darwinism as the scientific framework for their literary explorations. Although von Sacher-Masoch, Svevo, and Canetti were clearly not the first writers who explored human nature with their fiction – poets and novelists had already been doing this for thousands of years (let's think of Homer and Shakespeare, for example) - Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Italo Svevo, and Elias Canetti may very well have been the first novelists whose ideas and literary imagination were grounded in a scientifically valid, all-encompassing theory of human nature: Darwin's evolutionary theory.



## CHAPTER TWO<sup>1</sup>

### LEOPOLD VON SACHER-MASOCH

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch is best known as the author of the novella *Venus in Furs* (1874) and for giving origin to the term masochism. Von Sacher-Masoch was born in 1836 in Lemberg, the capital of the province of Galicia, located in the extreme north-east corner of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which today corresponds to Ukraine. He died in 1895 at the age of 59. During his lifetime, his vast and ambitious literary production earned him a reputation as the new Goethe or the new Tolstoy. However, news of his eccentric personal life and sexual preferences for domineering women eclipsed his literary fame. Only a small fraction of his work has been translated into English, and although *Venus in Furs* has been translated and adapted to plays in many different countries, the rest of his literary production is known mainly to scholars of Austrian literature. Literary criticism of von Sacher-Masoch's work generally falls into one of two fields: work that focuses on *Venus in Furs* or explores the theme of sexual deviancy or masochism in von Sacher-Masoch's other writings, or work that focuses on his ethnographic novellas and short stories that explore Jewish culture and lifestyles in Galicia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The influence of Darwinism on von Sacher-Masoch's fiction, particularly his novella *The Iluy* (1877), was ignored for a long time. For example, in the critical notes accompanying the English translation of some of von Sacher-Masoch's novellas including *The Iluy*, the translator Michael O'Pecko acknowledged the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy on von Sacher-Masoch's fiction but never mentioned Darwin's name (O'Pecko 1994). Similarly, according to the biography of Leopold von Sacher-

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novellas *The Wanderer*, *Don Juan of Kolomea*, *The Man Who Re-Enlisted*, and *Moonlight* (with relative page numbers) refer to this English edition: Leopold von Sacher Masoch: *Love. The Legacy of Cain*. 2003. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press. Citations from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novella *The Iluy* (with relative page numbers) refer to this English edition: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch: *A Light for Others, and other Jewish Tales from Galicia*. 1994. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press.

Masoch written by Cleugh (1967), the main theme of *The Iluy* is the effect of political absolutism upon scholars and scientists, without any reference to Darwinism. The Austrian literary scholar Werner Michler was the first to recognize and explore systematically the influence of Darwinism on von Sacher-Masoch's work (Michler 1999; see also more recent essays by Ajouri, (2014) Saul (2014) and Schümann (2014) in the edited volume *The literary and cultural reception of Charles Darwin in Europe*).

Although it is not clear whether von Sacher-Masoch ever read Charles Darwin's work directly, he was clearly familiar with the writings of German evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel, who was the strongest advocate of Darwin's evolutionary theory in Germany and who speculated about the evolution of the human mind and human behavior even earlier and more strongly than Darwin himself did (Richards 2008). Von Sacher-Masoch embraced Darwinism and became convinced that biological evolution was the key to explaining many fundamental aspects of the human mind and human behavior. In the tradition of Schelling and Goethe, von Sacher-Masoch was convinced that literature and the other arts could complement science in the quest for understanding and explaining human nature. Early in his writing career, he set out to write a major literary opus with the title of *The Legacy of Cain*, which was supposed to address the entirety of the human condition, and was presumably modeled after Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. *The Legacy of Cain* was meant to address the six main themes of Love, Property, State, War, Work, and Death. Von Sacher-Masoch planned to address each theme with six individual novellas: the first five novellas would explore many issues related to the theme and the last was intended to summarize the author's conclusions and to present his solution for the problems set in the previous ones.

The first complete set of six novellas, entitled *Love*, was published in 1870. It included a prologue, the *Wanderer*, three previously published novellas, *Don Juan of Kolomea* (1864), *The Man who Surrenders* (aka *The Man who Re-Enlisted*, 1868), and *Moonlight* (1868), and three new novellas, *Venus in Furs*, *Plato's Love*, and *Marzella*. The second installment of *The Legacy of Cain*, *Property*, was published in 1874. It contained six novellas: *Peasant Justice*, *The Haidamak*, *Hasara Raba*, *A Testament*, *Basil Hymen*, and *Paradise on the Dniester*. The third part of *The Legacy of Cain*, *State*, remained incomplete: two novellas that were meant to be part of it, *The Black Cabinet*, and *The Iluy*, were written and published in 1877 and 1882. Little or nothing was written on the themes of War, Work, or Death. 1882 also saw the publication of *The Old Castellan*, first conceived as a section

of Part Five, *Work*, and *The Mother of God* from the projected Part Six, *Death*.

The first cycle of novellas, *Love*, addresses the romantic relationships between men and women, which von Sacher-Masoch interpreted as being mainly conflictual. The second cycle, *Property*, is about the injustice of private property on any large scale. The two published novellas of the *State* cycle suggest that von Sacher-Masoch intended to address the conflict between the individual and the institutions as well as the injustice of capitalistic economic systems. More about von Sacher-Masoch's intentions with regard to the *State* and the other incomplete novella cycles can be gleaned from the content of the prologue to the entire body of work, *The Wanderer*, which represents the author's manifesto and illustrates his plans for addressing the six main themes of his work.

As has been clearly recognized by his biographers (e.g. Cleugh 1967), Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was a social reformer. According to Harvard University Professor Steven Pinker, there are two types of social reformers: the moralist condemns one behavior and promotes another; the scientist, on the other hand, tries to understand why human beings do the things they do, hoping that self-knowledge will lead to positive change (Fassler 2015). Von Sacher-Masoch clearly had the approach of a scientist, not that of a moralist. He believed that selfishness and competitiveness are intrinsic to human nature and that they can have potentially disastrous consequences for human relationships and human societies. However, he was aware that biology is not destiny. Knowledge and understanding of human nature can allow human beings to recognize, control, and even suppress their dangerous biological impulses. Ignorance of human nature, instead, means that human beings cannot control or modify their predispositions. Knowledge and understanding can lead to moral improvement of human beings, and to peace and tolerance between individuals and between countries. Von Sacher-Masoch believed in the power of education and in human beings' potential to emancipate themselves from their biological predispositions and impulses.

Von Sacher-Masoch believed that Darwinian theory provided the basis for the scientific understanding of human nature. He believed that evolution can explain the conflict humans experience in their lives and the pain and suffering they cause to one another in their social and romantic relationships and also in the wars between ethnic groups and countries. But he also believed that scientific theories are not sufficient because science cannot

capture the variability, complexity, and the nuances of everyday human life. Literature can contribute to the scientific enlightenment of human beings by discovering, identifying, exploring, and characterizing many aspects of human nature. Accordingly, his magnum opus *The Legacy of Cain* was designed to discover, identify, analyze, and characterize some major aspects of human nature and human affairs; illustrate the problems that they present, and offer some solutions. In his view, the writer has the moral responsibility to help individuals see the truth about themselves, and just like the scientist, he or she hopes that this self-knowledge will lead to positive change.

Ferdinand Kürnberger, in his preface to von Sacher-Masoch's *The Legacy of Cain*, considered this work to be a "natural history of man" and something akin to "anthropology" (cited by Michler 1999). Von Sacher-Masoch later appropriated Kürnberger's concept and wrote that '*literary fiction ought to be an illustrated natural history of mankind... Neither the inner nor the outer life of humanity should be idealized. On the contrary, the chaos of human folly, passions and vices should be illuminated by the writer with the eternal light of truth, so as to show the way forward*' (Cleugh, 1967, p. 9; also in Michler 1999). In von Sacher-Masoch's view, literary prose should provide scientific enlightenment with analyses and illustrations of human psychological and social processes. In 1873, Sacher-Masoch declared that both "*poetry and science had the moral obligation to spread truth, both by spreading long-established scientific knowledge that had not yet been evangelized to the masses and through the discovery of new truths in the lives and hearts of men*" (Michler 1999). He argued that among all artists, only the "*writers of novels are advantageously positioned, for there is no other type of art or branch of the arts of writing that have been able to hold up in competition in the same manner with the sciences*" (Michler 1999). In von Sacher-Masoch's view, the close relationship between the novel and the empirical sciences is based on "*the peculiarity of the epic fantasy, which attempts to understand man against the background of nature and in his relationship with the conditions of culture, that is, to see him as modern science also sees him*" (Michler 1999). Von Sacher-Masoch repudiated all of art's autonomous postulates: art was not an end in itself, but had a moral duty, and a very serious and significant one.

Von Sacher-Masoch thought that literature could not only help discover and illustrate many aspects of human nature but also help human beings emancipate themselves from their biological foundations and the legacy of their evolutionary past, what he called 'the legacy of Cain'. As reported by Michler (1999), von Sacher-Masoch stated "*This thought [“the progressive,*

*intellectual and moral evolution and elevation of man from out of himself, the gradual cultivation of nature through him”] lies at the very core of my Legacy of Cain...”. Von Sacher-Masoch believed that “The closer man is to nature, the more prejudiced he is in his animalistic desires, his passions, and the more terrible he is when he tries to satisfy these desires or to destroy the happiness of another. The farther he strays from nature through culture, the more his egoism is curtailed, and the originally wild and bloody struggle for existence assumes a more mild form” (Michler 1999). Therefore, one of the goals von Sacher-Masoch aimed to accomplish by identifying problems and offering solutions through the fictional stories of the *Legacy of Cain* was to facilitate the “progressive, intellectual and moral evolution and elevation of man out of himself” (Michler 1999). Although this aspect of von Sacher-Masoch’s work has been missed by most literary scholars who have written about him, according to Michler (1999) “one cannot doubt the earnestness of Sacher-Masoch’s scientific enlightenment project, or the seriousness of the emancipatory substance of his literature”.*

The goals von Sacher-Masoch set for himself with the *Legacy of Cain* also influenced his choice of narrative strategies, for example, with regard to character development in his novellas. As reported by Michler (1999), “*I was the first,*” von Sacher-Masoch wrote in 1899 in an essay on the Jewish sects in Galicia, “to attempt to develop a figure by identifying his way of thinking, feeling, and acting, not only psychologically and physiologically, but through recourse to the nature in which he was born, in which he grew up and which surrounded him and of which he was a part, just like a tree or an animal, and I tried to explain man through his relationships, through the conditions that define the way in which he lives.” Michler (1999) argued that his novella cycle does not raise the issue of the development of character, but rather focuses on encyclopedic, “typological” completeness. The historicizing of the characters is integrated in such a way that natural history does not appear through individual psychology, but rather through a phylogeny that can be “revived” again. The characters, although they are conceived of as types, maintain a “Darwinian” historicity (Michler 1999).

In the *Legacy of Cain*, one could interpret von Sacher-Masoch’s disillusionment with regard to the concept of romantic love or institutions such as marriage or the state as an expression of a pessimistic attitude about human life. For example, in the novellas of the *Love* cycle, the bourgeois concept of romantic love as “passion” is presented as just a mask for naturally driven desire; as soon as desire has taken its course, love disappears (Michler 1999). If the claim about pessimism has some validity,

it is likely that von Sacher-Masoch derived such pessimism not from Darwin's theory itself but from a synthesis and integration of Darwin's theory with Schopenhauer's philosophy, a common process followed by novelists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who wrote psychological, introspective novels and were clearly exposed to contemporary and popular scientific and philosophical theories. According to Michler, von Sacher-Masoch's "program" should be read in the context of this fusion of Darwin with Schopenhauer, as the author himself once wrote: "*My 'Legacy of Cain' will become generally applicable only when the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Darwin have fully triumphed*" (Michler 1999).

### ***The Legacy of Cain: The Wanderer (1870)***

*The Wanderer* is the prologue to the *Legacy of Cain*. It is a short story that represents von Sacher-Masoch's manifesto of his Darwinian view of human nature and anticipates the plan for the entire magnum opus. The structure of the story is clearly inspired by Ivan Turgenev's book *A Sportsman's Sketches*, a collection of stories published in 1852 in which a hunter typically walks through a forest, meets someone, and they have a conversation. At the beginning of the *The Wanderer*, the unnamed narrator is out hunting in a forest accompanied by an old gamekeeper. When he shoots down an eagle, he hears a voice screaming at him "*Cain! Cain!*" from the bushes. The voice belongs to a wanderer, an old holy man, a member of a Russian religious sect, who lives alone like a hermit, has no wife and no property, and does not recognize the authority of the state or the church. Wanderers are not allowed to own property, they 'flee' from the world and human life, and have only limited interactions with other human beings, when they appear for brief periods of time in villages and cities.

The narrator and the wanderer engage in a verbal exchange, in which the wanderer blasts the human lust for hunting animals and murdering other human beings as our 'legacy of Cain', that is the legacy of our evolutionary past as violent animals. The wanderer tells the narrator that before adopting his current life style, he has experienced all of the defining and disgraceful aspects of human life: love ("*I have loved and been laughed at and trampled under foot when I loved with all my heart*"), marriage ("*I have seen the wife entrusted to me by the church and the state, the mother of my children, lying in the arms of a stranger*"), work ("*I have worn the yoke more than once, felt the whip, labored for others, and have striven tirelessly for profit*"), ruthless competition for property and status ("*I fought my brothers for the sake of possessions and advantages. I've betrayed and been betrayed,*



*robbed and been robbed*”), murder and death (“*I’ve taken other people’s lives and have myself been near to death. All for the sake of this devilish gold and property*”), and citizenship of one’s country and war against those of other countries (“*I’ve passionately loved the state whose citizen I am and the people whose language I speak... I’ve marched off to war with angry enthusiasm and have hated and persecuted and killed others simply because they spoke another language*”). The wanderer recognizes that the descendants of Cain are engaged with one another in a continuous struggle for survival - in which their success necessarily occurs at the expenses of others - and that their lives and efforts revolve around protecting their own life and fearing and avoiding death (“*Like the children of Cain, I have understood how to live at the expense of others...I feared only one thing: death. I trembled before it, have spilled tears at the thought of being separated from this beloved existence*”).

Based on his personal life experience, the wanderer then shares with the narrator his insights into human life and human nature. These insights include, among others: the world and life were not created by God because there is no God; life is a painful experience for all creatures, as survival and success depend on exploitation of others; the only purpose of life is to protect and reproduce itself; human beings are fundamentally animals (“*the most rational, bloodthirsty, and cruel of the beasts*”); human relationships are intrinsically competitive and exploitative (“*the woman enslaves the man, the children their parents, the rich man the poor man, the state its citizens*”); nature has endowed human beings with motivations, desires, and emotions only to ensure that they protect themselves and reproduce; pleasure and happiness are nothing but an illusion. The wanderer then elaborates on each of the six main themes that constitute the entire *Legacy of Cain* cycle of novellas.

With regard to Love, he believes that “*Love is the war of the sexes in which each struggles to subjugate the other, to make the other into a slave, a beast of burden, for men and women are enemies by nature, like all living things, united in sweet lust, as it were, united into a single being for a short time by their desires, by the drive to propagate themselves, only to ignite an even more terrible enmity and to battle even more violently and more ruthlessly for dominance.*”

These are his views of Property: “*I have also come to know the curse.. that is to be found in property, in all forms of ownership. Born of theft and murder, robbery and deceit, it goads us on and creates hatred and fights,*

*theft and murder, robbery and deceit forever and without end. ..There is in the children of Cain a demonic lust for property, a cruelty that seizes everything within its reach, if only to prevent others from acquiring it. And it's not enough that the individual uses violence and tricks to lay claim to possessions from which hundreds or even thousands could live; it is as if everyone wanted to set himself up for eternity, himself and his brood, and so he leaves it all to his children and grandchildren who void their filth on silk cushions while the children of those who have nothing go miserably to their ruin. One man seeks to acquire, and the other seeks to keep hold of what he has. The unpropertied man wages war against the property owner, a struggle without end; one rises and the other falls and begins to climb upwards all over again And there is never compromise or justice”.*

He says the following about State and War: *“But the individual is too weak to wage war against his innumerable brothers... and so the children of Cain have united into communities, nations, and states for the sake of plunder and murder. It is true that in these groups the egoism of the individual is restricted in many ways, his larcenous and murderous lust hindered, but the same codes of law that are supposed to prevent new crimes lend, at the same time, new dignity to the criminals of earlier peoples and times... our sweat, even our blood is minted into money in order to pay for the caprices of those who rule the state, whether these caprices be called luxury and opulence, hunting and women, soldiers, sciences or the arts.... Justice becomes false, and the education of the people, the only means of a general reform, is given pitiful alms, and so knowledge and insight are restricted to narrow circles. Those who represent the people with their words and their pens are persecuted, laden with chains, exterminated, or bribed and made into apostles of the lie. Those, however, who serve the state seek only their own advantage under the cover of its cloak and even rob it, though they call it their god, and in the end they repay the nation for its servitude, its shame, and its stultification with bankruptcy. .... Nations and state are big people, and like the little ones, they are eager to plunder and thirsty for blood. .. That which would be punished by prison or the scaffold in civil society is practiced by a nation, is done by one state to another, without anyone seeing crime or depravity in the matter... What is war but the struggle for existence written large, the rape of countries and the murder of peoples accompanied by the slavery of service to the flag, espionage, betrayal, arson, sexual coercion, and plunder followed by epidemic and famine!”*

The wanderer's view of Work is more positive, except that our human nature leads us to exploit and enslave others for work purposes: *“Work alone*

*frees us from all misery. As long as everyone strives to have others work for them, to enjoy without effort the fruit of others' efforts, as long as one portion of humanity is forced to suffer slavery and need so that others can indulge themselves in luxury, there will be no peace on earth. Work is the tribute we pay to life: whoever wishes to live and enjoy life must work. And everything that fortune grants us can be found in our work and striving. Only by means of a manly, courageous struggle for existence can one triumph...".*

Finally, Death is not something unnatural and pathological to be feared and avoided, but it is part of the human natural cycle and as such should be embraced. *"How few people understand that it is death alone that brings us complete salvation, freedom, and peace. How few, despairing of life, have the courage to seek out death calmly and voluntarily. It is better, of course, never to have been born, but if one has been born, then one should experience the dream calmly, with a smile of contempt for its shimmering, deceptive images so that one can sink into the lap of nature forever".*

The wanderer concludes that these six things, *"love, property, the state, war, work, and death, are the legacy of Cain, who slew his brother and whose brother's blood cried out to heaven, and the Lord spoke to Cain: 'You shall be cursed upon the earth and a fugitive and a vagabond'".* But the wanderer's message is not entirely pessimistic; he points to scientific enlightenment as the road to salvation: *"I saw that happiness lies only in understanding."*

After giving his speech, the wanderer disappears leaving the narrator alone into the forest. The narrator muses about the ideas expressed by the wanderer and feels more connected with nature: *"everything about me became alive and expressive and touched my soul. Tree, bushes, grasses, even the stones and the earth stretched their arms out toward me"*. The narrator then imagines that the goddess of nature appears standing in front of him and speaks to him. She says, among other things: *"I am the truth; I am the life. I know nothing of your fear, and your life or death means nothing to me. Don't consider me cruel for leaving your life, that which you consider to be your true essence, at the mercy of chance, like that of your brothers"*. After the goddess ceases to speak and disappears, the narrator draws his final conclusions about what he has learned from these two encounters: *"I saw how sacred lies have blinded us, how we, the inheritors of Cain, were not placed above nature as her masters, but on the contrary are the slaves that she uses for her undecipherable purposes and that she*

*has infected us with this anxiety to live and propagate so that she may be certain of their exhausting labors, their oppressive serfdom, their hopeless servitude”.*

The conclusion of *The Wanderer* is about the importance of knowledge and truth, and their guiding role in the life of the intellectual, as a bright star lights the path home. *“In the distance, I saw my village and the friendly, shimmering lights of my house. A deep calm came over me, and in me burned solemn and still a sacred yearning for knowledge and truth, and when came upon the familiar path between the meadows and the fields, there suddenly stood a great star in the heavens, big and bright, and it seemed to me that it was leading me on, as it once did the three kings who sought the light of the world”.*

According to some, the wanderer’s speech (and von Sacher-Masoch’s view of life) amounts to little more than *“an exposition of pessimistic pantheism”* (Cleugh, 1967, p. 65). Others, such as Michael O’Pecko, who translated *The Wanderer* into English, have maintained that *“the wanderer is in fact an emphatic spokesperson for the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer... The wanderer, true to Schopenhauer’s principles, rejects the concept of love, stating that men and women are, like all creatures, enemies by nature who are united only for a short time by lust and nature’s blind drive to reproduce the species. Property, the state, and war arise only through the human propensity to exploit the work of others. For Schopenhauer, the only escapes from this hell are death and art, the latter being the disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the great truths. But for the wanderer, the great keys to existence are work, the only activity that can free man from his misery, and death, which, as the only source of complete release, peace, and freedom, should be welcomed rather than feared. The narrator’s reception of the wanderer’s precepts seems uncritical, but its effect upon him is positive, leaving in him a “holy yearning for knowledge and truth”. These principles articulated by the wanderer underlie not just the remaining tales in this collection, but virtually all of Sacher-Masoch’s work throughout his long career”* (O’Pecko 1994, pp. 182-183). O’Pecko, therefore, ignores any reference to Darwinism in von Sacher-Masoch’s view of human nature, as well as von Sacher-Masoch’s grandiose plan for scientific enlightenment of human kind through first, discovery and knowledge of the truth about ourselves, and then emancipation from our biological human nature through education. Arguing that von Sacher-Masoch embraces a Schopenhauerian view of art as *“the disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the great truths”*

reflects a profound misunderstanding of his social reformer's agenda and his scientific enlightenment approach.

The Darwinian perspective presented in *The Wanderer* was only recently recognized by Michler (1999), who noted “without keeping track of the number of times in which it is paraphrased, the standard phrase “struggle for existence” is uttered four times in a few, printed pages to the *Wanderer*”. Michler also noted that the contradiction between the “animal nature” of man proclaimed in the prologue and the melioristic *telos* towards culture can only be resolved in the complete project of *The Legacy of Cain*. He argued that each individual novella within the work raises issues and requires a temporary suspension, until the issues are resolved at the end of each cycle or the entire project.

### ***The Legacy of Cain: Love***

The novellas that comprise the *Love* cycle make numerous references to the Darwinian ‘struggle for existence’, and elaborate on the notion that competition is also what defines romantic relationships between men and women. For example, von Sacher-Masoch writes the following in *Don Juan of Kolomea* (p. 60): “Have you ever considered how nature tricks us with love? ... In essence, men and women are created only to be enemies. ... Nature wants to propagate our race. What else would it want. We, however, are vain and gullible enough to convince ourselves that it has our happiness in mind. Yes – they are incompatible as fish and poppies – as soon as there is a child, that’s the end of happiness and love, too, and man and wife look at each other like two people who have made a bad trade. Both of them are deceived, and yet neither has betrayed the other. But they continue to believe that happiness is the only important thing, and they feud with each other instead of accusing nature, which has given us, besides love, which is so transitory, another feeling that never ends: love for one’s children”.

Similar concepts are found in this excerpt from *The Man Who Re-Enlisted* (p. 110): “Every living thing feels how sad existence is, and yet they all struggle desperately to cling to it. Humans struggle with nature and with other humans, and men struggle with women, and their love is nothing but another example of the struggle for existence. Both want to go on living in their children. Everyone wants to see his face, his eye, and his soul live again in his children, and everyone wants to become a better, more perfect being by appropriating to himself the superior qualities of the other. In

*addition, women, both for their own sakes and for the sakes of their children, want to use their men in order to live”.*

Finally, the following representation of human life is provided in the novella *Moonlight* (pp. 122-124): *“Everything was silent. Only man was awake in his misery, laboring in the sweat of his brow for the sake of his absurd existence that he passionately loves and despises in equal measure. From the dawning morning until late at night, all his thoughts are directed with blind obstinacy towards it maintenance; his heart constricts as if in a cramp, and his poor head becomes feverish when he sees it threatened or believes that what he considers to be its enjoyments or its dignity is being cut short or stolen; and even in sleep, his brain continues working toward tomorrow and the day after and on and on, and his dreams, life’s images torment him. Innate in him is a perpetual agitation that seeks to secure and protect his attainments; he builds and acquires for eternity, whether he plows the loose earth that provides the eternally cooking hearth of his existence or steers his little vessel through the world’s oceans, whether he observes the course of the stars or chronicles the fates and the history of his clan with childish industry – he studies, thinks, designs, and invents with the sole purpose of keeping his sad machinery running, and he would sacrifice his best ideas at any time for a piece of bread. Life is what he wants, life above all else, life and nourishment for his little lamp that threatens at every moment to be extinguished forever. And that is the reason for his anxious need to reproduce his life in new creatures to whom he leaves behind the testament of his joys, but who inherit nothing but his pains, his struggles, and his suffering. How he loves them, his heirs, how he protects them and cares for them and raises them as if they were his own beloved self multiplied by three or even ten! And as inventive as he is in propagating his own existence and in exploiting it in his own way, he shows himself to be just as untiring and ruthless in endangering, threatening, and plundering the existence of others for his own benefit. He cheats, he steals, he robs, and he murders without respite. He sets up mad, complicated theories in order to helplessly subjugate whole races of his fellow beings. Without a single thought he has condemned and branded animals and men of different color or different language, and he has done so only in order to live at the expense of the living. It is an eternal and bloody war, one day waged quietly from hearth to hearth and forge to forge, the next day fought loudly and noisily on battlefields and oceans, and always under holy but fraudulent flags, and always without mercy and without end. And yet, there is renunciation, austere and blessed, in whose assured peace lays the only happiness that is granted us, peace, quiet, sleep, and death. And why do we tremble so in the*