

What literature shows that is not easy to tell

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Doktor Glas and the medical students

- ▶ My experience of reading this classical Swedish novel together with medical students contributed to my wish to explore the relation between clinical practice and literary experience.
- ▶ The interest in this area has grown but there still seems to be lots to do in order to find out more about what, how and when.

Clinical judgement, clinical virtues

- ▶ Clinical judgement is that capacity for benevolent action in clinical situations which helps the physician to reach the goals of medicine
- ▶ It seems reasonable to assume that this capacity is related to clinical virtues
- ▶ There are many suggestions for such
- ▶ Clinical virtues may perhaps be seen as aspects of our personality that dispose us to act in ways that are beneficial for our patients

Challenges of scientific medicine

- ▶ From general to particular
- ▶ Recognizing ambiguity and paradox
- ▶ Handling uncertainty
- ▶ Balancing empathic engagement and necessary distance
- ▶ Recognizing the moral dimension
- ▶ Showing interest in narratives

But why literature?

- ▶ There is a richness and subtlety and complexity in literature that seems to carry the potential to make our understanding of the world more accurate, precise, nuanced
- ▶ If it really does must of course depend on what, when and how we read?
- ▶ Wayne Booth writes about "the company we keep"

Frank Palmer

- ▶ Suppose that we say that serious engagement with literature (...) can provide moral insight, deepen our understanding of human conduct, show us things about the nature of evil and help us see beneath appearances (...) - all fairly common claims – then it cannot be that it is the "purpose" of literature to inform our understanding this way. If our interest in art is not to be merely instrumental, literature must therefore be distinguished from propaganda, politics or preaching. The "message-seeker" or "ideology-hunter" will not see fictional characters as individuals, but as embodiments of this or that idea, this or that political innuendo – and the work will be judged according to such criteria.

Martha Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge*

- ▶ ...there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it (..) that cannot be fully and adequately expressed in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.

Anders Tyrberg: Anrop och ansvar (Call and responsibility)

- ▶ The communicative act – the claim and the call of the author and the responsibility of the reader – may thus be described as an agreement, an implicit contract. It is through a pact between narrator and reader that the performative power of the narrative becomes possible. But in spite of such an implicit agreement the aesthetic act of communication is risky: a price must be paid by the author/narrator, as well as by the listener/reader. Words are powerful and to narrate is to expose a reader or a listener to an exertion of power and an act of seduction. But to expose oneself as a reader also implies an implicit consent to such an attempted seduction (...) To read a book is to make oneself morally disposable to influence, be it contagion, seduction, persuasion, seemingly neutral information, or amusement. And to make oneself accessible to someone else's influence is never an act of innocence.

Katarina Elam: *Emotions as a Mode of Understanding*

- ▶ We can now discern an interconnection between our emotions, narrative, reflection, and the self, where language is a recurring theme. This means we are engaged in both a receptive and a creative activity in our understanding of ourselves and the world. This is a never ending circle or spiral in which a prereflective and a reflective mode of being cooperate, with both levels equally important to a person's development and sense of self.

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

- ▶ The sensitive balancing between upholding a degree of self-respect and mental balance, and being the victim of growing self-deception.
- ▶ The continued presence of past events in our lives.
- ▶ The double face of good-will.
- ▶ The power of symbols, and how they can move us to constructive and destructive action.

The leap from showing to telling

Probably, most of what we may learn from seeing *The Wild Duck*, is possible to formulate in the language of science or philosophy or ordinary language.

What, then, is it that fiction adds? Why not just have the psychology, philosophy, psychiatry and sociology texts?

Possible answers

- ▶ Imagination, emotion, intuition
- ▶ Complexity, richness of perspectives
- ▶ Ambiguity, paradox
- ▶ Metaphors, symbols
- ▶ Catharsis

Literary skills

- ▶ Do these potential insights depend for their coming into being on a set of “skills” so that one has to be a very well trained reader to acquire them?
- ▶ Perhaps to some extent, but only marginally
- ▶ If this was true, critics and literary theorists should be totally superior to all others, and is there any support for that?

Maj-Gull Axelssons *Aprilhäxan* (*The April Witch*)

- ▶ The risk that compassion turns into condescendence
- ▶ The varieties of goodness
- ▶ The uniqueness of persons with severe physical challenges

Particular and unique

But, again, why should we learn anything from unique cases – in particular, from fictional unique cases? We learn from controlled EBM studies, controlled trials – and from well corroborated qualitative studies. Is there not a seductive potential in strong literary narratives, potentially misleading our experience?

The Death of a Beekeeper

- ▶ The phenomenology of pain
- ▶ How landscape and mental world may become interchangeable – “the extended ego”
- ▶ How the conception of one’s self will deeply form how we meet serious life-threatening disease

Risks of fiction

If we admit that fiction potentially may increase our knowledge, expand our experience of the world, it seems as if we have to admit that fiction can also distort, belie, be destructive.

Which texts are dangerous? We can not say. We can at most say that there seem to more or less invitations to this in different texts. The rest is up to the reader.

Theme: The phenomenology of depression

- ▶ Amos Oz: *A Story of Love and Darkness*
- ▶ Kerstin Ekman: *Knivkastarens kvinna (The knife-thrower's woman)*
- ▶ Styron: *Sophie's Choice*

Poetry

- ▶ Poetry concentrates narrative meaning - condenses it, compresses it.
- ▶ Ambiguity, paradox, metaphor – these are characteristic of much poetry
- ▶ They also appear as elements in the clinical encounter
- ▶ But does it work for students and clinicians?

Tomas Tranströmer: Track

2 A.M. moonlight. The train has stopped
out in a field. Far off sparks of light from a town,
flickering coldly on the horizon.
As when a man goes so deep into his dream
he will never remember he was there
when he returns again to his view.
Or when a person goes so deep into a sickness
that his days all become some flickering sparks, a swarm,
feeble and cold on the horizon
The train is entirely motionless.
2 o'clock: strong moonlight, few stars.

Tomas Tranströmer: Under pressure

The blue sky's engine-drone is deafening.
 We're living here on a shuddering work-site
 where the ocean depths can suddenly open up
 shells and telephones hiss.
 You can see beauty only from the side, hastily.
 The dense grain on the field, many colours in a yellow stream.
 The restless shadows in my head are drawn there.
 They want to creep into the grain and turn to gold.
 Darkness falls. At midnight I go to bed.
 The smaller boat puts out from the larger boat.
 You are alone on the water.
 Society's dark hull drifts further and further away.

(transl Robert Bly)

In Swedish: Start of Preludium

Uppvaknandet är ett fallskärmshop från drömmen
 Fri från den kvävande virveln sjunker
 resenären mot morgonens gröna zon.
 Tingen flammar upp. Han förnimmar –i dallrande
 lärkans position – de mäktiga trädrotsystemens
 Underjordiskt svängande lampor.

From *17 dikter*, 1954

How literature saved the life of medicine?

So literature will save medicine, as Toulmin somewhat maliciously said that medicine did with ethics thirty years ago? No, hardly but it may be a clue.

The End

Thank you so much for your interest!