Narrative and Knowledge: On a Motif in Ross Chambers.[1]

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The question of literature's purpose has received a range of answers centred on the basic elements of instruction and delight. Didacticism and hedonism go hand in hand in the theories of, for example, Horace, Sidney, and Dryden. Similarly, for nineteenth century readers and writers of novels, Anthony Trollope' s idea of fiction as "'Rational Amusement'" is a central one.[2] Just as often, though, the issue is polarised. For instance, Allen Tate regards literature as a kind of knowledge in its own right. Thus, in an essay originally published in 1941, Tate concludes that literature, his example is *Hamlet*, is of "the mythical order."[3] Tate relies on I. A. Richards's conception of myth, which holds that myths "are no amusement or diversion to be sought as a relaxation and an escape from the hard realities of life. They are these hard realities in projection, their symbolic recognition, co-ordination and acceptance (. . .) . The opposite and discordant qualities in things in them acquire a form."[4] Another non-hedonistic idea of literature, is Kenneth Burke' s attempt to treat verbal works of art as "'proverbs

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[1] I presented an early version of this paper entitled "Iconicity, Narrative, and Cognition" at the 5th European Conference for English Studies, University of Helsinki, 25-29 August, 2000. I'm grateful for comments and suggestions from the audience.

[2] See Robert A Colby, "'Rational Amusement': Fiction vs. Useful Knowledge", *Victorian Literature and Society: Essays Presented to Richard D. Altick*, second impression, ed. James R. Kincaid and Albert J. Kuhn (Ohio, 1985).

[3] Allen Tate, "Literature as Knowledge", *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago, 1968), p. 104.

[4] I.A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, pp. 171-72. Quoted in Tate, "Literature and Knowledge", p. 104.

writ large'."[5] They are considered as "strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another,"[6] but not strategies for the achievement of delight.[7] In contrast, Oscar Wilde's concluding statement in the "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, "All art is quite useless",[8] manifests a wholesale hedonism. Similarly, post-structuralism highlights literature's pleasure principle. For instance, Wlad Godzich, taking as his point of departure the undermining of the distinction between fabula and sjuzhet accomplished by post-structuralist narratology, severs narrative's etymological relation to knowing completely by regarding the knowledge claims of narrative (both fictional and non-fictional) as non-existent. More particularly, Godzich pronounces that "a narrative may give us pleasure or hold our interest, but it is useless from the point of view of cognition: it offers no reliable knowledge about that which it purports to relate."[9]

The work of Ross Chambers, at least since the publication of his *Story and Situation* in 1984, forms a succession of attempts at recovering some of narrative's cognitive potential and at considering it in combination with narrative's promise of pleasure. While recognising Chambers' concern with seduction, this essay deals particularly with the motif of knowledge in his work. I try to map

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[5] Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living", *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1971), p. 944.

[6] Ibid., p. 947.

[7] Apart from Tate and Burke, who exemplify attempts to think about literature=s relation to knowledge and related concepts from a literary point of view, there is also a tradition relying on basic philosophical concepts, for instance, David Novitz, "Fiction and the Growth of Knowledge", *Grazer philosophische Studien: internationale Zeitschrift für analytische Philosophie* 19 (1983), 47-68 and Peter McCormick, "Moral Knowledge and Fiction", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1982), 399-410. However, while it may appear natural to look towards the field where these issues are traditionally discussed, the dependence on the conceptualisations of knowledge in *philosophy* does not automatically guarantee the explication of knowledge in *literature*.

[8] Oscar Wilde, "The Preface", *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Paris, 1905), p. vii.

[9] Wlad Godzich, "foreword", Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis, 1984), p. xiv.

out his interest in the cognitive powers of narrative fiction by addressing in turn his idea of narrative wisdom, his attempt at theorising oppositional narrative as an essentially Socratic mode of intellectual and moral midwifery, and lastly, his relatively strong cognitive claim with regard to the kind of narrative that he calls loiterature.

I

Story and Situation[10] explores, among other things, how modern art tales, and narrative fiction in general, succeed in seducing readers by releasing and restraining the possibility of their interpretation. Ultimately, according to Chambers, seduction appears to involve the acquisition of narrative experience and wisdom on the reader's part. In order to understand how Chambers manages to introduce the notion of wisdom into his study of narrative seduction, it is necessary to begin by outlining some of his central ideas concerning narrative communication.

As the title of his book indicates, story and situation are intimately connected components of meaning in Chambers's universe. His concept of narrative point encapsulates the interconnectedness of the two. Narrative point is the idea that the meaning of a story depends upon the situation in which it is told and that storytelling has the capacity of influencing human situations, including the storytelling situation, either by reinforcing or reversing them (p. 7). Story and situation are engaged in an ongoing process of reciprocal influence from which meaning arises.

Relying on Walter Benjamin's distinction between traditional storytelling and modern novels,[11] Chambers differentiates between two kinds of storytelling situations: On the one hand, a fundamentally didactic situation, and, on the other, its opposite, a

[10] Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis, 1984). Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969).

hedonistic non-situation. The former is the traditional mode characterised by immediacy and "use value" (p. 12): narrative is "a mode of direct communication of some pre-existing knowledge" (p. 11) between a teller with significant personal experience to convey and an audience characterised by "a 'natural' thirst for information." The former is said to manifest "narrative authority" (p. 51) in contrast to the latter, which displays "narratorial authority" by abandoning the function of conveying information in favour of "the arousing of 'interest'" (p.11). This move from didacticism to hedonism involves narrative's turning "'artistic'" or "'text'", that is, narrative becomes a form of communication involving a high degree of specialisation and autonomisation. In this mode narrative exists independently of specific tellers and listeners; it is "freed from the intentionality of an authorial subject and from the determination resulting from a specific recipient" (p. 12, henceforth abstracted into the concept of 'the reader'). Such a text is now "alienated" and a part of "the system of exchange value." The exchange value of a text, "its significance, or worth, is a function of its interpretability as a complex sign for which other discursive signs can be substituted." Being useless, these texts are forced to rely on seduction in order to achieve an audience. Successful seduction involves the text's kindling of the reader's curiosity through the promise of interpretability - the promise, for instance, that a high degree of pleasure may be derived from solving its enigmas and discovering its secrets (pp. 214-15).

At this stage, then, Chambers seems to opt for a hedonistic notion of narrative fiction: narrative traffics in pleasure, and its value depends on the amount of pleasure it is capable of conferring on its readers. But in his discussion of how modern narrative, having become thoroughly alienated, specialised, autonomised, and non-situationalised, not only manages to mean, but manages to mean specific things, Chambers brings back an element of didacticism by regarding the process of reading as an experience for the reader. He holds that the texts he is addressing are

> *situationally* self-referential and that these texts have recourse to a form of self-referentiality that analyses

> them in their communicational function and actualizes them as communicational acts, specifying the conditions – the necessary understandings between reader and text – for them to be successful as acts of literary communication. (pp. 25-26)

Certain examples of modern literary narrative, then, point out their own narrative situation by providing what Chambers also calls "models" and/or "antimodels" (pp. 30-31) of themselves as communicational acts. And the reader has to implement these models in order to access the meaning of a narrative. Although modern narrative does not contain any use value in the traditional sense by not allowing the extraction of a particular knowledge from the tale of the teller's own experience, it, nevertheless, becomes an experience for the reader. Reading becomes an encounter, that is, a process where the reader has to familiarise himself with the conditions of meaning of a text - an experience which, for Chambers, is related to the reader's acquisition of some form of knowledge. In the following I focus on two of Chambers's examples of this process without going into details with his intricate and elaborate analyses.

In his reading of "Sylvie", Chambers demonstrates how the seductive aspects of Nerval's narrative "lead the reader imperceptibly along (. . .) into union with the narrator 'I'" (p. 116). The reader's union or identification with the narrator "I", moreover, "takes the form of *experiencing the narration as the narrator has experienced his life*, that is, as an initiation into wisdom" (p. 116) which consists of the reader's evolution from illusion to reality. Here Chambers utilises his idea of reading in which the text is the operative part, "specifying the conditions" and acting out a particular design on its reader. The reader, on the other hand, is cast as the essentially passive beneficiary of the text's bringing about the fusion of the reader with the telling subject. Successful fusion involves an act of imitation on the reader<s part: the way in which the reader experiences the narration echoes or mirrors the way in which the narrator experienced his life. More precisely, it is the initiation into wisdom, that is, the transition from illusion to reality, which is

mirrored. Similarly, Chambers's reading of Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet" explicitly stresses the theme of "'the getting of wisdom'" (p. 174) in relation to both the narrator and the reader of the story. The wisdom in question concerns the ironic stance, or "comic vision" (p. 174), which narrator and reader acquire and which allow them to distance themselves from the delirious quest for Vereker's secret - a quest that is representative of the other characters in the story. "The empirical reader" must go through a particular "evolution" in order to live up to the demands of the "projected audience" of the text:

> A victim, like the narrator, of 'unappeased desire,' this reader's 'consternation' should, in turn, produce a distancing effect that will make the reader a more suitable audience for the narrator-writer, with his comic vision of the melodrama of critical involvement. The reader's evolution, in short, mimes that of the narrator, who thus stands, in this sense also, as the figure of his own text. (pp. 174-75).

As was the case in the reading of "Sylvie", wisdom is not transmitted directly from narrator to reader in the form of an explicitly formulated moral or message. It is the benefit which results from an act of imitation on the reader's part of the narrator's evolution from a naive stance of involvement to a stance of ironic distance. Wisdom is the result of the empirical reader's successful acceptance of the influence exerted by the story on its reading situation. The story changes, in the sense of reverses, the reader's way of reading from deep involvement in the solving of the enigma of the story to a distanced ironic stance towards his previous involvement. In short, the reader of James's text, during the experience or process of reading, is, first and foremost, taught how to read "The Figure in the Carpet" by adopting a distanced point of view and abstaining from enigma hunting.

With particular reference to Chambers's reading of James's art tale, Godzich, in his "Foreword" to *Story and Situation*, extends Chambers's ideas and outlines the dramatic consequences of this

wisdom: "What is undone is the critic's reliance upon the model of subject-object cognition that presupposes that the path to knowledge for a subject requires the appropriation and 'thesaurization' of the object."[12] In fact, according to Godzich, James's text produces the lesson of post-structuralism since its wisdom deconstructs, and forces the reader to abandon, the scientific model of cognition. In its place, according to Godzich's commentary, the acquired wisdom asks the critic to concentrate "on his or her relation to others" by producing "a story that will indeed relate him or her to others." Godzich's summary of the lesson that Chambers reads from James's story confers substantial privileges on the notions of narrative experience and wisdom since they are construed as having the power of releasing us from our scientific modes of knowing, almost as if we experienced a kind of Copernican revolution. I want to point out that Godzich's claim hinges on the fact that the reader of "The Figure in the Carpet" perceives a relation of similarity between the mode of reading criticised by James's text and our scientific model of cognition - a relation of similarity which the text does *not* indicate or point out explicitly. It seems to me, then, that Godzich is over-dramatising the effects of undoing resulting from Chambers's reading of James's short story. However, a closer look at the concepts of experience and wisdom will, nevertheless, confirm their counteractive capacity. We saw that reading, according to Chambers, involved the narrative's production of an imitation of the narrator on the reader's part. Reading, then, is neither experience in the sense of observation as the source of knowledge, nor is it experience in the sense of the knowledge that results from observation. Rather, reading, I want to suggest, is experience in Walter Benjamin's sense of the word. In a fragment, he states that:

> Experiences [*Erfahrungen*]are lived similarities [*gelebte Ähnlichkeiten*].

[12]Wlad Godzich, "Foreword", p. xx.

> There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience - in the sense of life experience [*Lebenserfahrung*] - according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based. What is decisive here is not the causal connections established over the course of time, but the similarities that have been lived.
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> Most people have no wish to learn from experience. Moreover, their convictions [*Überzeugungen*] prevent them from doing so.[13]

Although Benjamin is talking about lived similarities between different events in the life of one subject where Chambers, when he is claiming that the reader imitates the narrator, is dealing with similarities between the lives of different kinds of subjects, the fundamental analogy between reading as imitation and life experience as lived similarity is fairly clear. I suggest therefore that we understand reading according to Chambers, that is, reading as experience in terms of Benjamin's notion of lived similarity.

The Benjaminian notion of experience is helpful for other reasons as well. The last part of the above quotation brings together the notions of experience and conviction and their relation to knowledge. Benjamin seems to be saying that, although experience furnishes us with knowledge, we do not benefit from it becausewe have no desire to do so and, simultaneously, because we are barred from it anyway. Thus, our experiences, our lived similarities, are defeated by our convictions, that is, our firmly held truths and beliefs, for instance. This contrast between experience and conviction also helps us understand Chambers's notion of wisdom. According to the *OED* wisdom involves the "capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct."[14] And there is no

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[13] Walter Benjamin, "Experience", *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., & London, 1999), II, 553. The German original is taken from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), VI, pp. 88-89.

[14] *OED*, definition 1.a.

reason why this ability should not rely upon both experience and conviction. Chambers's notion of wisdom is a narrow one since it appears to exclude and counteract our convictions, for instance, our convictions concerning how to read texts.

Benjamin's distinction between those who learn from experience and "most people" who do not raises the important question concerning the identity of Chambers's reader: who is the beneficiary of narrative wisdom according to Chambers? The answer is any empirical reader who is willing to become "a suitable" audience of the fictional narrative, that is, any reader who accepts the conditions of meaning specified by the text.

In short, in *Story and Situation*, Chambers relates the didactic and hedonistic aspects of narrative fiction by forwarding a notion of reading as Benjaminian experience, or lived similarity. The latter concept involves the reader's initiation into or getting of wisdom, that is, a kind of knowledge that challenges the reader's convictions, first and foremost concerning reading, secondly, and only by implication, concerning modes of scientific cognition in general.

II

Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative[15] is an attempt by Chambers to explore how reading influences and changes readers in ways both different from and similar to the notions advocated in *Story and Situation*. In relation to the motif of knowledge, Chambers develops a conception of reading as an activity of being "taught" and "a matter of self-education" (xvii). But in contrast to his earlier position, the issue of didacticism is no longer necessarily dependent upon an understanding of narrative fiction as involving seduction. How education is accomplished is now considered as a work specific rather than genre specific

[15] Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago and London, 1991). Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

phenomenon. In the following I focus specifically on his notions of narrative education as soothsaying and self-recognition.

The fact that the mode of narrative education changes from work to work is Chambers's point in the chapter entitled "Graffiti on the Prison Wall: Writing Under Dictation." Here three Latin American novels dealing with "metaphorical imprisonment" (p. 175) are analysed. The novels differ in several ways in their relation to knowledge. For instance, in conclusion to his analysis of Miguel Angel Asturias's novel *El Señor Presidente*, he states: "Thus, the novel's attempt at witnessing resolves into an enactment of universal complicity, making inescapable the denunciatory realization that both it and its reader are ineluctably part of the presidential system" (p. 212). This novel, then, functions as an enactment in both senses of the word: the sense of an action or process involving the performance or dramatisation of its message of universal complicity, as well the sense that this action is a laying down of the law, a decree, which, in accordance with its nature, is destined to produce one and only one realisation or understanding in the reader's mind. Chambers goes even further in his suggestion that the novel has strong biblical affinities. He points out motifs of soothsaying incarnated by "a toothless old lottery seller" (p. 200) and another character "significantly called 'El Ticher' ['the Teacher']" (p. 202), and describes the "vision" of the novel as "prophetic, illuminatory, and apocalyptic" (p. 210).

In contrast to this predominantly didactic knowledge-as-soothsaying model, where the promise of interpretability is no longer the bait that seduces readers, Chambers theorises a model involving seduction and Socratic *re*cognition rather than prophesy and teaching in his reading of Manuel Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña*:

> Puig's novel, as a maieutic text does not tell 'how it is,' does not dictate its vision, and does not adopt a denunciative tone [in contrast to *El Señor Presidente*]. It leads us, like Valentín [one of the novel's main characters], to an act of self-recognition, a recognition of

> *what we knew* but could not acknowledge. In that recognition we see that we are ourselves - again like Valentín - *both* victims of the carceral system *and* its administrators. As prisoners we are in desperate need of comfort and empowerment; but there can be no ultimate liberation unless and until we cease ourselves to be agents of oppression and sites of selfrepression. (. . .) what we have learned is what we already knew but needed to be *seduced* into discovering. And the implication of that knowledge is that, like Valentín, we must change the nature of our alienating and self-alienating desire. But to acknowledge *that* is already to have changed our desire. (pp. 231-32)

Chambers's notion of narrative maieusis contains the familiar notion of reader passivity. As in the case of narrative wisdom, the reader is lead by the narrative. Moreover, being guided by the text involves imitation. The fact that readers now imitate a character (in this case the character of Valentín) is arguably immaterial. But the nature of the gain that results from this act of imitation is slightly different. In contrast to wisdom, which counteracted our convictions by making us emerge from states of illusion into reality on the basis of new knowledge, that is, knowledge about something we did not already know, maieusis involves self-recognition: the becoming fully conscious of ideas, norms, and values that are already known, but unacknowledged in our minds. Narrative maieusis works by allowing the reader to live a similarity not only between himself and a fictional character, but also, because of the notion of *re*cognition, between himself and another part of himself.

This idea of narrative as the midwife of knowledge, seductively leading its readers towards self-recognition, forms an extension of Chambers's attempt to think about narrative wisdom. The concept of narrative self-recognition is more persuasive than narrative wisdom since it is more modest: it does not depend upon the dramatic shifts in identity between, for instance, illusion and reality, or confused involvement and ironic distance. And it certainly does

not involve the Copernican revolution of demolishing an established mode of cognition, which characterised Godzich's reading of Chambers's claims. But in spite of its modesty the idea of narrative fiction as maieusis does claim a specific status for its knowledge potential. In contrast to other forms of knowledge, it brings the reader into a dialogue with earlier selves, long gone experiences, and states of consciousness that he otherwise wouldn't be able to access. For instance, in the case of Puig's novel, its reading involves, among other things, the reader's *re*cognition of the fact that gender is a social construct. We already know this from our experience of living within the confines of either masculinity or femininity and from having to live up to the norms and values of these categories. But most of us tend to forget it in our everyday lives where we act from our convictions rather than our experiences as Benjamin pointed out.

Another interesting aspect of Chambers's idea of Puig's novel as an intellectual midwife concerns its text specificty. In contrast to his totalising claims concerning narrative wisdom, Chambers explicitly contrasts narrative self-recognition with narrative soothsaying or teaching as I outlined in the beginning of this section. Maieusis, then, is a potential that individual narratives may or may not activate.

In *Room for Maneuver*, then, Chambers forwards two ideas of narrative knowledge: soothsaying and self-recognition. Where the former presents a kind of fundamentalist strategy forcing the reader into acknowledging its truth by blocking his possibilities of interpretation, the latter relies on its seductive aspect to lead the reader into an experience of self-recognition - a Benjaminian lived similarity between the reader's selves.

III

Apart from the fact that *Room for Maneuver* also deals with narrative soothsaying, it complements *Story and Situation* as Chambers himself points out (p. xviii). I have suggested that they form a mutual project by combining considerations of seduction and knowledge, in particular in terms of narrative experience,

wisdom, education, and the notion of the maiuetic text. Chambers's most recent book[16] can be seen as an attempt to deal much more explicitly with the motif of knowledge. As a consequence, I think, the overt concern with seduction is toned down. Although it still figures as an important aspect of the relation between narrative and reader, the concept of knowledge is massively foregrounded as is evident from the index where it is one of the most conspicuous entries. Accordingly, Chambers's claims for narrative's cognitive potential have increased markedly, especially in relation to the concept of fringe knowledge he detects in what he calls loiterature. But before I outline these ideas it is necessary first to consider his basic notion of narrative in *Loiterature*.

Chambers theorises narrative as governed by two complementary rather than contradictory logics that exist in permanent tension with each other. On the one hand, it embodies the progressive, unidirectional principle, which drives towards "the closed structure of story, marked by the cohesive linking of a beginning and an end" (p. 86). On the other, narrative also manifests a tendency to "*di*-gression that is the characteristic feature of *dis*-course" implying "dispersal and, if not exactly directionlessness, at least some uncertainty of direction" (p. 297, n3). Narrative, then, is a twisted cord since it involves the tension between progressive and digressive strands. According to Chambers, the relationship between the two threads is hierarchised with progression as the discursively superior strand. Yet, while digression tampers with unidirectionality, it is not regarded as a transgression or violation of narrative's progressive aspect. Progression tolerates digressive material, which is held "to be discourse's (. . .) *natural* proclivity" (p. 86), which is represented as "secondary yet in some sense relevant, not fully cohesive but admissible." However, progressiveness must also limit and control digressiveness "because it represents an emergence of the natural within the order of the cultural" (p. 87). Digressiveness, according to Chambers,

[16] Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln and London, 1999). Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

demonstrates a similarly ambiguous attitude to its discursive superior. While it manifests a rupture of progressiveness, it tones down its challenge "by a certain performance of harmlessness" (p. 89).

Loiterature is the name Chambers assigns to narratives that parade their digressiveness, "playing a quite delicate game" (p. 90), on the one hand "flirting with the potential for transgression" while, on the other, respecting "the (of course, undefined) limit beyond which flirtation with the possibility of transgression becomes transgression *tout court.*" According to Chambers, then, narrative is a cord consisting of a superior progressive strand, which extends a particular kind of circumscribing tolerance to its discursive inferior, which, in turn, masks its challenge of rupture in an air of harmlessness. In contrast, loiterature is a twisted cord in the sense that it wrings out of shape or distorts the complex relation between the progressive and digressive strands by foregrounding the latter without abolishing the former's sovereignty. By distorting the relation between progression and digression of mainstream narrative, it furnishes knowledge about the exclusive nature of this kind of unidirectional discourse and the kind of knowledge it lays claim to. It does so by creating a discursive space for what Chambers calls the loiterly subject and his distinctive approach to particular kinds of knowledge. In the following I take a closer look at Chambers's ideas of the loiterly subject and his unique forms of knowledge.

Chambers's notion of the loiterly subject stresses his "somewhat marginal membership in the social 'family'" (p. 56). Moreover, he is defined as having a particular relation to the two separate worlds of centre and periphery since he has access to both, existing "on the cusp of a dominant social context and its other" (p. 57). The loiterly subject's peripheral relation to his surrounding contexts is one of both disadvantage and privilege. Among the advantages enjoyed by the loiterly subject is "access to a certain kind of knowledge" (p. 59). Loiterly

> texts affirm the existence of 'fringe knowledge' that is inaccessible to more disciplined subjects, who are too close to the seat of power and the cultural main stream,

> but is available to loiterly subjects by virtue of their own peripheral position, with its advantages and drawbacks. Such fringe knowledge is defined as knowledge of the social fringe, of which those whose lives are lived closer to the social 'centre' are necessarily ignorant, knowledge of an other that is scorned, not only by disciplinary subjects but also by the disciplinary modes of knowledge ... to which loiterly subjects are so unsuited (pp. 59-60).

In the fundamental division and conflict that Chambers construes between the disciplinary modes of knowledge and fringe knowledge, the familiar distinction from *Story and Situation* and *Room for Maneuver* between conviction on the one hand, and wisdom and self-recognition on the other, reappears.

Moreover, Chambers's idea of the peripheral position of loiterly subjects and their distinctive approach to knowledge as a kind of worldly omniscience owes something to the notion of education as soothsaying, teaching, and prophecy developed in his reading of *El Señor Presidente*. More particularly, it can be regarded as a further secularisation of these notions. As worldly prophets and soothsayers, loiterly subjects have certain advantages in the acquisition of knowledge. In contrast to the objective exponents of disciplinary knowledge, who rely on the conviction or scientific model that separates knower from known, Chambers figures them as readers situated on the verge of different contexts (p. 61). As such they manifest a unique capability for movement between contexts, which is responsible for the privileged nature of their knowledge. In fact, Chambers's way of conceptualising their distinctive capability for movement confers a kind of secular omniscience and omnipresence upon them. Their "motility (. . .) is, thus, simultaneously, social (a to-and-fro between dominant and marginalized class attachments), temporal (a sense of the intermingling of temporal moments), and spatial (a sense of the close proximity of here and elsewhere)" (p. 62).

Further, this worldly omnipresence and omniscience means that loiterly subjects are capable of reading "in two directions" (p. 61) and producing "critical" knowledge of the centre as well as

"empathetic" knowledge of the periphery. The concept of critical knowledge concerns knowledge which relativises or counteracts "mainstreams society's own self-absorbed indifference to, and ignorance of, otherness", that is, the term incarnates an aspect included in the notions of narrative wisdom and self-recognition; more particularly, the one concerned with the reader's realisation of the inadequacy of his own convictions. By empathetic knowledge I take it that Chambers understands knowledge that results from the process of feeling into, identifying with, and participating in that which one is inquiring into. Empathetic knowledge, then, is closely related to Benjamin's notion of experience as lived similarity and Chambers's notions of wisdom and self-recognition, which excluded conviction. But, in contrast to narrative wisdom resulting from the union between narrator and reader, and in contrast to the idea of self-recognition establishing relations between the reader's selves, empathetic knowledge involves the relation between the loiterly subject and *something existing independently of the reading situation*, that is, the social fringe to which the narrative must, necessarily, somehow *refer*. Chambers's idea of empathetic knowledge, then, activates the referential function of narrative (otherwise we wouldn't know what or who the empathetic knowledge in question was about). At the same time, the notion relies on the story - discourse distinction, the dismantling of which formed the point of departure of Godzich's totalisation of narrative's hedonistic aspect as I pointed out in the introduction.

Another important aspect of Chambers's notion of fringe knowledge is the fact that it is the privilege of a loiterly subject which is textual *and* empirical at the same time. The relation between the flesh-and-blood author and the textual subject is stressed by Chambers repeatedly. For instance, this is the way in which he introduces his chapter "Loiterly Subjects":

> I'll consider Gérard de Nerval's self-representation in *October Nights* (*Les Nuits d'Octobre*, 1852) as an amiable flâneur, Colette's semi-autobiographical representation of 'a new woman,' Renée Néré - she of the chiasmatic

> and oddly bigendered name - in a loosely episodic novel *The Vagabond* (*La Vagabonde*, 1910), and, finally, Neil Bartlett's engaging study, in *Who Was That Man?*, of the difficulty for a contemporary gay man of piecing together a community of those banished by homophobia to society's fringe. (p. 57).

While the genres of flâneur realism (Nerval) and historiography (Bartlett) help to justify the claim of identity between author and narrator with reference to the conventions of specific non-fictional contracts, Collette's novel, traditionally, is barred from doing just that since the fictional contract split the two beyond reconciliation. But in relation to the genre of loiterature, Chambers maintains that it makes sense to consider them together. In the vocabulary of *Story and Situation*, then, loiterature manifests a kind of narrative authority. Chambers develops his notion of a relation between the textual and empirical aspects of the loiterly subject, by conceptualising him as a traveller. But it is a particular kind of traveller that Chambers has in mind since he "scarcely needs to move at all, or to move very far" (p. 62) and his movements have the character of "strolling" (Nerval), "touring" (Colette) or "cruising" (Bartlett) (pp. 66-82) between centre and periphery. Importantly, Chambers turns to Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" in order to ground the notion of travelling and "appropriate" the idea of "*Erfahrung*" (p. 64) for the traveller's experience. This allows Chambers to flesh out the notion of fringe knowledge as *Erfahrung* by differentiating it from "*Erlebnis*, referring to the experience of those whose life (*Leben*) is lived on the spot rather than under the sign of movement" (p. 65), and "*Erkenntnis*, knowledge":

> *Erfahrung*, then, is knowledge of a kind that knowledge itself - let's call it foundational knowledge - *can't have* ... it's knowledge that has learned not to trust itself as knowledge (because it is always incomplete), but which can't trust foundational knowledge either (because it is always exclusionary). (p. 65)

Knowledge as *Erfahrung* or experience, then, is empathetic knowledge of the social fringe, that is tentative knowledge open to infinite supplementation. Moreover, it is critical knowledge of the centre, manifesting a corrective function, reminding us of the fact that *Erkenntnis* or foundational knowledge is always partial.

In contrast to the earlier appearances of *Erfahrung* where it represented the potential experience of lived similarity awaiting any empirical reader, the concept is now narrowed down considerably by being linked to an actual class of loiterly subjects characterised by a high degree of motility. *Erfahrung* is transferred from the domain of the potential reader to that of the actual writer.

Chambers's notion of fringe knowledge, then, both continues and departs from some of his central ideas and assumptions in *Story and Situation* and *Room for Maneuver*. The fundamental distinction between two kinds of knowledge, that is, foundational and fringe knowledge, sustains the earlier divisions between conviction and Benjamin's notion of *Erfahrung* or lived similarity in terms of wisdom and self-recognition. Similarly the notion that knowledge gathered from *Erfahrung* challenges our convictions in important ways is a fundamental one in Chambers's thought. The aspect of fringe knowledge that is called empathetic knowledge, although the basic idea of lived similarity remains the same, marks a new point of departure. Where *Story and Situation* and *Room for Maneuver* concerned the question of knowledge in relation to two components, that is, narrative and empirical reader, *Loiterature* operates with four: empirical subject, narrative, social context (centre and periphery), and empirical reader. For the concept of empathetic knowledge to work, Chambers has to rely on the idea of narrative authority, that is, of an empirical subject who warrants the fringe intelligence, and he has to maintain the validity of the story - discourse distinction, more particularly, the notion that story precedes discourse: the excluded social fringe produces loiterature and not the other way around.

Speculations concerning the general nature and purpose of narrative or anything else for that matter, are always open to

arguments that take their point of departure from counter examples. But, although I think that it is possible to come up with examples of narrative that would formally qualify as loiterature by manifesting a high degree of digressiveness while also dismantling the notions of privileged subjectivity and knowledge, it is to Chambers's credit that he tries to formulate a point of departure which explicitly sends him outside the hedonism of post-structuralism. Instead of triumphantly totalising a particular narrative function, the historical fact that narrative has been used for hedonistic as well as didactic purposes in a wealth of different contexts ought to make us consider narrative's functional capacities along these lines. To this end, Chambers's attempts to think about loiterly subjects, discourses and various kinds of knowledge are important contributions.

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