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On the Utility of the Humanities

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Abstract
Humanities have already been criticized for enclosing themselves in a self-referential world that needs to interact with other fields of knowledge in order to accomplish its original aim: to make human life meaningful. Based on The *Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann and on the concept of Narrative Medicine by Rita Charon, this essay sheds light on the role of Humanities in the world today and the importance of discussing this issue.
Keywords: Literary texts; Bioethics; Narrative Medicine; Humanities

I

"When I think that we kill the newborn in our times, all efforts of culture seem to me useless. What then did Goethe and Bach teach people? To kill the newborn!"
(Vassili Grossman, *Life and Fate*, translated by Robert Chapman)

Hans Castorp arrives at the Berghof International Sanatorium for a three week stay. He has just graduated in engineering and intends, after visiting his cousin, to join the firm Tunder&Wilms as a naval engineer.

The twenty three year old Castorp ends up spending seven years on the magic mountain in Davos, leaving there to fight alongside his compatriots in the First World War.

During this long and unexpected sojourn, we see the narrative of Castorp's transformation unfold: the naval engineer, "on the technical side, in touch with world commerce", is humanized; is literally influenced by the humanities.

A good definition of what this might mean occurs when Settembrini, recently introduced to Castorp and asking his profession, says:
As for myself, I am a humanist, a *homo humanus*, and I have no mechanical ingenuity, however sincere my respect for it. But I can well understand that the theory of your craft requires a clear and keen mind, and its practice not less than the entire man. Am I right? (2009, p. 45)

Settembrini's passage was in fact a simple programme, but one that is much neglected nowadays. The sum total of science and practice (the technical side) should be a "clear and keen mind" and "a man in the true sense of the word". Nowadays (but also in other times) we would say that it should be knowledge of the world, critical thinking and the exercise of citizenship. Without this, it is understood, an engineer is not worth much.

On the other hand, Settembrini also appears to claim that the humanities, the *homo humanus*, does not constitute a department set apart from engineeing; rather, it belongs to all departments since it is irrelevant to his point whether Castorp is an engineer, surgeon, entomologist or financial analyst.

In historical terms, there have been two important moments for this perspective of Settembrini´s, assuming the transversality and primacy of the humanities in the broad sense.

In Ancient Greece, with the advent of democracy and rhetoric, general culture, critical thinking and debating skills were deemed to be indispensible for the citizen active in the *res publica* and for the learning and exercise of technical knowledge[1]. Gorgias, in Plato's eponymous dialogue, surprises Socrates when he says:
I often accompanied my brother and other physicians to the house of some patient who was refusing a medicine or would not allow himself to be treated by iron and fire. When the physician's admonitions were powerless, I would persuade the patient with no other art than rhetoric. (456b).
In the second part of this article, we will see how narrative medicine deals with questions generically put by Gorgias.

In Francisco Rico's work, *El sueño de humanismo. De Petrarca a Erasmo*, the Spanish essayist describes this Renaissance period as a time when humanistic studies, as opposed to scholastics, took on huge relevance. From private education to the public and professional sphere, the humanities became refocused as

[1] See "Introdução. Os Sofistas e a Sofística", by Maria José Vaz Pinto (2005).

knowledge without boundaries. Speaking of Europe in 1536, the year when Erasmus died, Rico tells us:
In thought and science, in art and literature, in political theories, law, a myriad other disciplines and also ways of living, the specificities most worthy of note, those that distinguish the most original directions, owe a decisive debt to the *studia humanitatis*. (2002, p. 154)
As happened with the encyclopaedic, argumentative and *citizen* rhetoric that constitutes *elocutio*, the humanist dream, Rico states, also fell into the hands of philology (2002, p. 98).

Dazzled by the forward-thinking Settembrini and the sinister Jesuit Naphta, the engineer gradually, throughout the narrative, acquires the generic skills of the humanities enunciated by the rhetoricians, renaissance men and Settembrini in the passage cited above. Unlike his cousin, a professional soldier, for whom disputes and exchanging ideas only results in confusion[1], Castorp immerses himself and takes part in the discussions, refining his knowledge of the world and his critical sense.

The point here is not even – let us leave that for some other time – an ethical perspective of the humanities. Despite the narrator, and Castorp himself, preferring Settembrini to Naphta[2], the young engineer learns to read the world[3] with the two pedagogues. This can be seen in the aplomb with which he takes part in the discussions with Settembrini and his success with the exotic Peeperkorn:
... he had given them an impromptu but quite respectable apologia for drinking; into which, en passant , he had slipped a reference to "civilization" ... and lastly, he had got round him, put him in the wrong, by asking him, quite simply, a question which one can scarcely answer and maintain the threatening pose or the raised fist. (1999, p. 386)

Thomas Mann abandons Castorp in the battlefield of the Great War. We do not know what happened to him there. We only know, as the narrator recognises in the final lines of the novel, that the naval engineer learned the lesson of the humanities: "Adventures of the flesh and in the spirit, while enhancing thy simplicity, granted thee to know in the spirit what in the flesh thou scarcely couldst have done." (1999, p. 484)

II

Castorp learned nothing in Davos, and a good thing too, about abstract literary structures, descriptive devices, literariness etc. that could be subsumed into the Buddhist theory of the pea with which Roland Barthes opens the essay S/Z[4].

On the other hand, the young engineer was only influenced by the humanities on the magic mountain since, as we have seen, they took on a transversal character, antithetical to any hermetic specialisation.

Broadly speaking (our argument does not need to go into detail here), the campaign for the autonomisation and specification of literary studies began with the Russian formalists at the beginning of the 20th century, and still has enthusiastic followers today.

It was this movement that famously led – with a number of exceptions[5]- to the divorce between literature, the humanities in a broad sense, and other branches of knowledge in the academies.

In departmentalising themselves, in claiming to be an end in themselves, with a specific jargon that was

[1] See the full passage: "You will find that when people discuss and express their views nothing ever comes of it but confusion worse confounded. I tell you, it doesn't matter in the least what a man's views are, so long as he is a decent chap. The best thing is to have no opinions, and just do one's duty." (2009, p. 265)
[2] In addition to other evidence throughout the novel, this can be seen in a beautiful passage near the end, in the context of the duel between Settembrini and Naphta. After the former has deliberately fired into the air, we read the following: "-Coward!" Naphta shrieked; and with this human shriek confessing that it takes more courage to fire than be fired upon, raised his pistol in a way that had nothing to do with duelling, and shot himself in the head." (1999, p. 478)
[3] "One out of five Europeans has difficulty reading the world" is the phrase chosen as the title for a report on literacy coordinated by Dutch princess Laurentien van Orangien. When this report was presented in Portugal, Laurentien urged the Portuguese minister of Education, Nuno Crato: "Tell your colleague in Finance that investing in literacy pays off". (*Público*, 15 October 2012, pp. 14-15)
[4] "There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many!) within a single structure (…)" Barthes, R. transl. Richard Miller. (1991). S/Z: an Essay. NY: Hill and Wang, p 3.
[5] In the 2011/12 academic year, the Faculty of Arts at Lisbon University opened a course it called "General Studies", the name of the first university in Portugal. This degree course, whose plan of studies includes course units such as 'The Study of Cultures', 'The Study of Literature', 'Classical Culture', 'Astronomy and Astrophysics', 'From Kepler to Fractals' and 'Evolution of Mathematical Thinking', seeks to rescue the Humanities from their sterile specialisation and isolation and from the consequent barrier that has been erected against other fields of knowledge. At least, that is the general idea transmitted by the statements about this course by Steiner, Gumbrecht, Sobrinho Simões, Ferraz da Costa, Rosado Fernandes and Teresa Patrício Gouveia at the UL site.
See also António Feijó who approaches the new course through the now overriding question of employability: "When we decided to create General Studies, we consulted a series of prominent people, and those most connected to industry told us it was exactly the type of people they wanted. People who know many different things can do more different things, and have better chances for employment than those who only know how to do one thing." (*Pública*, 8 May 2011, pp. 21-22)
Arantza de Areilza, director of the School of Arts and Humanities at the IE University in Segovia and Madrid says: "Imagination, initiative, critical analysis, coupled with a global view of what is happening and knowledge of languages is an unbeatable training in a time of contraction." (*Idem*, p. 22)

unintelligible and useless for other branches of knowledge, the humanities lost the capacity, just when it was so important to have, to teach the young Castorps to read the world. The following passage by the Spanish essayist Juan Luis Alborg sums up what we have just been saying:

What we don't know after all this is where did it go, this science of literature they sought to create, encompassing the specificness of literature – the famous literariness discovered and sponsored by Jakobson-, and given that it was made up of *deep structures*, how could mere mortals with no appreciation of or ability for underwater fishing ever recognise them. (1991, p. 26)

The obsession with its own specialised identity contributed dramatically towards establishing the boundaries between the humanities and the world. Being responsible for the crucial task of teaching us how to read the world, they have been, paradoxically, consigned to an unproductive and discredited exile.

The famous crisis of the humanities must therefore look to humanities' inner circle for those responsible. To confuse, as still happens, humanistic studies with technical or theoretical problems of literature per se, questions of *elocutio*, or writing without capital letters as Saramago does, cannot be attributed to people lacking in thought (whether students, teachers or researchers from other areas). It is the very dynamic of the humanities that needs revising and let us not wait for others to do the job for us (although, surprisingly, this is already happening, as we shall see later).

The problem of meaning, of satisfactorily articulating a meaning, is indispensible today in the fragmented, immediate, mediatic world in which we live. Narratives, the time of narratives, historical memory, the consequent capacity for comprehension, in fact everything Castorp underwent, are the best and most effective path to an acceptable hermeneutics of intelligibility. It is that, as, for example, Stuart Mill tells us, which is the role of the humanities in universities: "The object of universities is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings." (See Botton, 2012, p. 102)

Castorp understood this point on the magic mountain. In Philosophy, Bioethics and Medicine, there has been, since the end of the last century, a deepening understanding of the place of narrative (as a space where knowledge from different areas intersects and interacts, as a hospitable territory where what is in transit makes something happen). Shall we continue the debate on deep, underwater structures or not?

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?" T.S. Eliot once asked. Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? Colleges and universities must, once more, play a critical role in rediscovering that knowledge and that wisdom. Otherwise, they will resemble what Eliot described in a commentary on Dante's Inferno, when he wrote to the effect that hell is a place where nothing connects with nothing.[1]

The unity of knowledge that Vartan Gregorian stresses as being the ideal horizon of higher education arises from a concept of Man worth emphasising in current times, in a society increasingly marked by "monologues and non-places – that is, places that serve merely for something to pass through and nothing happens, except the anonymity and non-identification of that passing." As Carlos Azevedo said 1999, and this still holds for 2012, "it is around that situation that we must continue today to fulfil the place of literature and its destiny".[2]

The conception of the human being, as defended by Michel Renaud, among other current philosophers, is that of a "man who comes into being as an end in himself because he is – and should be – respected and will be respected so as to enable the simultaneous and reciprocal construction of the personal identities of the one respecting and the one being respected. The respect that human beings manifest thus becomes the expression and the measure of the reciprocal conquest of their personal identity."[3] The unity of understanding as the horizon of expectations in higher education demands that the notion of personal identity be re-centred in what Ricoeur termed the *homo capax*, the man who speaks, acts, narrates, is narrated and assumes responsibility for his actions, constructing a meaning for existence through narrative[4]. The words of Rainer Maria Rilke *O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod, das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht, darin er Liebe hatte, Sinn und Not*[5] draw the

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[1] Vartan Gregorian. 2004. *Colleges Must Reconstruct the Unity of Knowledge* (available at http://www.uvm.edu/~cems/explore/reconstruct.pdf)

[2] Carlos Azevedo. 1999. «O lugar da Literatura». In: *Revista da Faculdade de Letras, Línguas e Literatura*. Porto, XVI, pp. 9-22.

[3] Michel Renaud. 2008. "A pertinência do conceito filosófico de Identidade Pessoal para a investigação Biomédica". In: *Investigação Biomédica: Reflexões Éticas*, Coord. Paula Martinho da Silva, Lisboa CNECV: Gradiva, p. 266.

[4] The capable or acting man is one who is self-reflective and is revealed in his humanity from the way he takes the initiative in the world, the way he approaches the world, things, and other people, being able to recognise himself as much in his works as in the movement of his existence in relation to them. This is humanity, the human quality – the fact of being able to consider oneself the author of one's own acts, capable of intentional actions, of initiatives that really change the course of things, being able to position oneself in a life narrative where one is simultaneously the narrator and a character in one's own story. This is humanity, not in the broad sense of mankind as a whole, but rather in the restricted sense of the human quality: what makes a man be a man.

Consequently, Ricoeur connects this notion of humanity with the fundamental reflexive capacity to appoint oneself the one who speaks, acts, narrates, "is narrated" and as the one who feels responsible and to whom the consequences of one's acts can be attributed. (Our translation)

P. Ricoeur, «Une entretien avec Paul Ricoeur. *Soiméme comme un autre»,* (propos recueillis par G. Jarczyk), Rue Descartes. Revue du Collège International de Philosophie, 1-2.

[5] Can be accessed at http://myweb.dal.ca/waue/Trans/Rilke-Stunden.html

circle of existence that falls outside the rationalist and objective attempts to apprehend the other. Medical, educational and social practices, geared to a rigorous application of principles to cases, regardless of the narratives of the individuals involved, need to be re-humanised, through encountering the narrative structure that humanised time.[1] In the field of medicine, the re-encounter with the word, with the literary text and the narrative of patients, health professionals and society at large, have formed the basis for the area of *Narrative Medicine*, to which the research and medical practice of Rita Charon have made a major contribution. Following on from Martha Nussbaum[2], according to whom narrative allows us to explore the consequences of the decisions and commitments we make over a prolonged period, Charon invites us to reflect on how reading literary texts gives us the opportunity to broaden our knowledge of human nature. This fits in with the view of Frank Palmer, who sees Literature as *a way of looking*, in that the literary text transmits more than a knowledge about what is represented, constituting rather a view of something that already exists in the imagination. Hence, we apply what we know of life and the world to the reading of a literary work, in a search for the meaning inherent to the inter-relations interwoven there and, in understanding these connections, we discover more about what we already knew, but in a formal mode, disconnected from experience and now updated (that is, which has now been put into a context that gives it meaning). Palmer establishes the distinction between *knowing about life* and *knowing of life*, associating the former mode of knowledge to cognitive theories of literature, and the latter to his proposal of a conception of literature as a space for experiencing a vision able to make us progress *morally* (which can be clarified if we recall the aforementioned concept of *homo capax*).[3] The power of narrative in the construction of meaning for existence, especially in the areas of medicine and ethics has been the object of analysis by other authors, in addition to Charon, such as Jerome Bruner, who highlights the narrative structure of human nature, the need for us to scrutinise our surroundings in search of the expectable and tell stories about what fits in our horizon of expectations or about what astonishes us when something unexpected happens[4].

In the area of medicine, bad news is a moment when we confront the unexpected, what Aristotle defined as *peripeteia,* and the history we construct at those times has implications in the world as we can integrate *surprise* into our narrative. For Bruner, the success or lack of success of this integration depends on the ability for *recognition,* in the one who is hearing the narrative, of the ordeal being experienced by the other who is sharing it with this hearer. This sharing opens us up to interpersonal involvement which is, after all, the essence of human nature, in other words, we are by definition beings involved in the culture of our community and we simultaneously aspire to preserve a certain autonomy from that community. Bakhtinian dialogism manifests itself in this approach of Bruner's on the power of narrative and sustains the work by Rita Charon on the practical application of the narrative categories to the relationship between health professional and patient.

Voices, contexts, characters, plot, time and space are narrative categories that we can only understand through the work of interpreting literary texts built on these concepts. Through reading, we develop the ability to identify who is speaking, what voices are present in the narrative that call us and possible provoke us: the voice of the narrator, the author, the characters, the historical community and the community of the fictional universe, our own voice and that which guides us in the reading or against which we read a given text. The ability to identify this heteroglossia present in the literary text is essential in the relationship that the care-giver establishes with the patient: the voices that construct the clinical case are necessarily multiple and echo beyond the

[1] As Paul Ricoeur stresses in *Time and Narrative*, 1:52, historical time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes condition of temporal existence

[2] "A whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example making use of a similar story, is capable of tracing the history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation….A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active" – cf. Martha Nussbaum. 1990. «Fragility of Goodness». In: Martha Nussbaum. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Frank Palmer, 1994. *Literature and Moral Understanding: A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education and Culture.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 188.

Palmer considers that the cognitive perspective, when applied to research on what literature can teach, focuses on knowledge about the world which the literary text transmits (*know about*). Palmer questions this knowledge based on propositions, as was previously explained, and proposes adapting Wayne Booth's concept of *showing*, so as to eliminate the hiatus between life and art assumed by an anti-cognitivist posture, or so as to overcome it in a more coherent way than that postulated on the basis of anti-cognitivist premises: "Leaving aside for the time being the instrumentalist problem, it is worth investigating whether we can provide an answer (…) via the distinction between telling and showing. This distinction was made famous by Wayne C. Booth in the *Rhetoric of Fiction* (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 1983. Chicago: University of Chicago Press), but I shall have little or nothing to say about his treatment, since it seems to me that he is chiefly concerned with different styles of narration. (p.188); Here I think it is necessary to insist – not by a priori fiat, but by remaining true to our experience of works of art – that the qualities necessary for showing are ones which, in the totality of their execution, draw us into the poem, the novel, the drama, such that (…) we are invited *to yield ourselves*. Thus if we respond to what we are shown we are in some sense acquainted with the imagined objects of attention." (p. 199)

[4] Cf. Jerome Bruner. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press;
___. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
___. 2002. *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

deontological and clinical principles that should regulate medical practice. The clinical case is regulated by principles independently of the face behind the case; but the narrative lays bare that face, demanding that the gaze of the care-giver opens up to the history preceding the diseased condition, the parallel history of friends and family, community, the relationship networks in which that particular individual exists, the history that will unroll in the future and from which the decisions made in the here and now can be assessed:

The dynamics of narrative voices in health care teams, including bioethics teams, offer opportunities and challenges in the area of ethical decision-making. First, the multivocality of any team should be sought out, and both the professional and personal contexts of each narrative voice should be considered. Second, all teams should strive to foster truly dialogic conversations among all parties engaged in making that decision. Finally, if a bioethicist is called into a team situation, he or she should engage this dynamic of group, and engage himself or herself in that process with them. Bakhtin's depiction of narrative voice is mutable, interactive and culturally rooted, never static or monolithic.[1]

Voice and context broaden the view of the caregiver, in a narrative structure by which time is humanised. As Rita Charon says, the identity of each of us can be defined as the place of the unique individual within the scope of his/her own body, history and consciousness, in which different social, political, linguistic, geographical, aesthetic, cultural, genetic, gender and family forces interact, acting on the *Self* and being influenced by it. This *Self* is inscribed in its stories, whose co-author has to be time. In the relationship with the patients, it is essential to distinguish between the time of the discourse, i.e. the care-giver's narrative time for a given patient, the narrative time of the patient and his/her family and friends, and the historical time, which is not limited to the timespace between the diagnosis and the present, but which extends throughout the entire life of that individual:

Our task as doctors, nurses, therapists, and ethicists is to learn each patient's personal language and its tenses, its images, its silences, and its tensions. That these narratives must unfold in time grants us the time to hear them, to provisionally understand them, and perhaps, thereby, to be of help. [2]

The voices, the context and time make sense if the faces (the characters) of patient and care-giver are duly integrated in the ethics/medicine deliberation. Decision-making in Medicine brings together the intellectual, emotional and imaginative dimensions of the human being, demanding that the uniqueness of the individuals involved is respected. The plot in which the patient is situated demands of care-givers the ability to respond as readers of that narrative. When diagnosed with prostate cancer Anatole Broyard, the famous literary critic of the *New York Times Book Review*, said that what he was looking for in a doctor was "a close reader of illness". As important as being a competent doctor is being a reader able to articulate the patient's physical and spiritual suffering and provide a response to the difficult moral decisions posed in experiencing the disease. Martha Montello and Charles M. Anderson consider that understanding the role of the reader has a huge impact on biomedical ethics, insofar as it is the role of the reader in the narratives of moral deliberation that in a more powerful way relates the experience of Literature with the deliberative processes of biomedical ethics.[3]

Concluding Remarks

Narrative medicine recognizes the centrality of stories and storytelling in illness and curing patients. Bearing in mind that the central event in health care consists of the act of narrating stories about illness and the act of listening to them, narrative medicine opens up new horizons in focusing its attention on the patients, on understanding the events of the disease represented by them and the strengthening of the affiliation with patients, colleagues, community and Self. This knowledge area, which forms a bridge between the humanities and life sciences, has seen the development of methods that allow for the refinement of the listening and comprehension skills that doctors and other health professionals need in their relationships with patients and the stories patients tell about their illnesses.

The sources of narrative medicine are Literature, patient-centred medicine and reflective practice. Understanding patients' cultural perspectives, as well as the cultural dimensions of health and sickness; therapeutic relationships; listening skills and clinical imagination – all these elements that are present in healthcare call for interpretation strategies, *close-reading*, that is to say, *attention* in the act of listening to the patient's story and in the ability to establish a true dialogue with patients and work colleagues. In this sense, the resources provided by literary texts, in the way they are constructed and interpreted, are useful in the teaching of medicine and in other healthcare areas, and also in the practice of these areas.

As Rita Charon reminds us, reflective practice gives inner peace. Tacit knowledge and the knowledge that comes from experience contribute towards effective work. The awareness of the position each person holds,

[1] Hilde Lindemann Nelson. "Context: backward, sideways, and forward". In: Rita Charon & Martha Montello (ed.) 2002. *Stories Matter: the role of narrative in medical ethics*. New York: Routledge, p. 55
[2] Rita Charon. 2002. " Time and Ethics", *Stories Matter*, p. 67
[3] Charles M. Anderson & Martha Montello. 2002. "The reader's response and why it matters in biomedical ethics". *Stories Matter*, pp. 85-94.

the relations that each establishes, the actions that each performs have implications on the effectiveness of relations in healthcare, enabling humanization, through a consolidation of the affiliation with patients, colleagues, the public and the Self. Thus medical practice becomes reflective practice, with teams of effective doctors able to achieve improved quality in public health and also effective healthcare.

We firmly believe that this interaction between Medicine and Narrative is an example for other social and educational practices that recognize the place of the Humanities as an integral part of true knowledge in the service of man – one that is integrative and liberating, in recognizing our vulnerability and the overcoming of that vulnerability:

We're a pine needle before a fire, we're a speck of dirt before an earthquake, we're a drop of dew before a storm, dear friend.

José Luis Peixoto[1]

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[1] José Luís Peixoto. transl. Richard Zenith. 2007. *Blank Gaze*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 81.

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