

## ***What Is It Like to Be a Compass Needle?***

*The Cognitive Potential of Literary Criticism, the Pleasure of Thinking,  
and the Kantian Notion of “Mutual Assistance of the Faculties”<sup>1</sup>*

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The main hypothesis advanced by the following paper is that literary criticism, traditionally seen as an exclusively and eminently *cultural* practice, could also be construed as rooted, in a distinctive manner, in the *natural* proceedings of the human intellect. Which obviously implies that criticism could be seen as other than derivative, auxiliary, contingent, or even “parasitic” (a notoriously ironic treatment of the latter label is to be found in Hillis Miller, [1977] 2005). We should, of course, start from the premises that such a “naturalist” perspective is counterintuitive. Being necessarily about something criticism seems destined to act at least ancillary and at most vicariously with respect to an instance external to and higher than itself.

Our point in confronting this alleged evidence will be that, irrespective of its insertion in a social-cultural hierarchy, literary criticism is partaking in a profound anthropological disposition of the human understanding, namely in the pleasure of thinking.

The theme of the delectable cogito, attested and culturally validated in the classical antiquity, acquired a new level of self-consciousness and self-confidence since the early modernity. In the context of a debate over the ways in which cognitive linguistics could assist the literary studies not only by providing strict formal criteria in order to describe and classify the literary works, but also through illuminating the entrenchments of these works in complex mental processes, Margaret F. Freeman feels herself compelled to quote a reflection which drives the topic of the “pleasure of thinking” to the very seed of the European intellectual modernity. More precisely, she introduces a quotation which expressively seizes the stylistics of the cognitive attitude of a Montaigne self-exiled in the ideal tower of his library, as opposed to the mental experiment (or the stylistics of mental

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experimentation) as practiced by Descartes in the *poêle*, the stove-heated room, where he is said to have experienced the central intuition of the *Discours de la méthode*:

Descartes's stove and Montaigne's library tower have given us two ways of living and thinking that are at root divergent. Stove people think that you can strip everything away and rebuild reality from precepts; tower people reckon that writing about and exploring or refining beliefs is the best you can do. For tower people, the process of writing and arguing is what thinking is; it is not concluding (Burrows, 2003 quoted in Freeman, 2010: 1176).

It is of course difficult to repress the temptation of identifying, in the manner of the author of the above lines, Descartes's position with what we know as the massive historical consequences of his solitary musings, in other words, with the process of institutionalization of rationality, of creating a system of the sciences, of replacing the dilettante functioning of the mental faculties with "faculties" as administrative units of an extended academic structure. A structure which in its turn is supposed to integrate itself in a general scheme of the division of labor. It is equally difficult to resist the temptation of seeing in Montaigne an ancestor of the compensatory reaction against this vastly disciplinarian ordering of thinking, a reaction which nurtured many an anarchist poetics, ethics or epistemology.

Nevertheless, we will resist these temptations because the evocation of the two foundational experiences of introspective reclusion interest us rather because of what unites them, because of what they jointly evoke and "irradiate": the intense and intimate pleasure of thinking, which implies patterns of interaction of the faculties that will become the central concern of our following investigation. The present approach is not interested in the pleasure of thinking as a cultural or ideological trope. Its object is the "natural" delight (natural in both senses of being "corporeal", somatic, and of having an adaptive functionality) generated, according to our basic working hypothesis, at the interferences of the different power-fields of our mental faculties. In other words, I posit the interaction between the specific forms of manifestation, or intensity levels of our different cognitive faculties (i.e. perception, memory, affective response, intuition, imagination and fantasy, conceptual thinking, logical connectivity) as the primary cause and the constitutive texture of an experience that we could call *cognitive pleasure*.

The above hypothesis is supported by one of the most authoritative models of the aesthetic experience, also definable as the experience of taste: the one devised by Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of judgment* (1790), Kant establishes a crystal-clear causal relationship between the reunion (today we might tend to call it the "clustering") of cognitive faculties and, on the one side, the aesthetic *reaction*, and, on the other side, the aesthetic *judgment*. In order to understand our experience with aesthetic objects, at all possible levels, from the primary sensory reaction to such an object to the impulses of creative "genius" supposed to have brought it into existence, to consciously evaluating it ("artistic criticism"), or, finally, to the attempt of explaining the mental foundations of all these reactions ("transcendental criticism"), we need representations that would bring together our cognitive faculties in patterns of interaction which are not typical for the dominant hierarchical mind-body representation.

The essence of this Kantian proposition is expressed in a famous fragment of the „First Introduction“ of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*:

Thus an aesthetic judgment is that whose determining ground lies in a sensation that is immediately connected with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. In the aesthetic judgement of sense it is that sensation which is immediately produced by the empirical intuition of the object, in the aesthetic judgement of reflection, however, it is that sensation which the harmonious play of the two faculties of cognition in the power of judgement, imagination and understanding, produces in the subject insofar as in the given representation the faculty of the apprehension of the one and the faculty of presentation of the other are reciprocally expeditious [*beförderlich*] (Kant 2000: 26).

In the interpretation of Paul Guyer ([1979] 1997), one of the most thorough contemporary commentators of the third *Critique*, in the above statement

Kant is maintaining that the faculty of reflective judgment can inaugurate a comparison of apprehended form with our general ability to connect intuitions and concepts – a comparison in some sense “unintentional” – and so produce a harmony between imagination and understanding which causes a feeling of pleasure, and the existence of which this pleasure expresses (Guyer, 1997: 69).

The above statement indicates the main reason for placing the Kantian theory in the center of the present approach. The close connection thus stipulated between pleasure and cognition, with its whole array of complexities and nuances, offers a theoretical ground for better articulating the concept of “pleasure of thinking”, which in its turn represents, in my view, the corner-stone of a theory of the natural rootedness of the cognitive practices of literary criticism.

Translating Guyer’s translation of Kant, we could say that the faculty of reflective judgment is actually a comparison between the perception of *forms* and the ability of *formalization* of the human intellect. The nature of this “comparison” between imagination and understanding is particularly interesting: its unintentional (*unabsichtlich*) character is especially stressed not only by the commentator, but first of all by the philosopher himself. This specification implies that the use of the notion of “comparison” has the status of a tentative approximation. Of course that, placed in the larger context of the Kantian system, this “comparison” could imply not only an analogical relation, but also (and without contradicting the first meaning) the famous Kantian logic of the as-if (*als ob*). But all such nuances apart, of special interest in the present context is the manner in which Kant further translates the comparison that he posits as the backbone of the reflective judgment into the formula “free play of faculties.”

This free play should not be imagined as an extreme frenzy, but rather as a courteous social intercourse, a sort of dance during which the partners can approach and even liberally touch each other, but only within the limits of impeccable civility. Such a representation would support Rüdiger Safranski’s image of the Kantian undertakings as fascinating distillations of the gratuities of the Rococo epoch into the most abstruse philosophy (Safranski, [1987] 1991: 105). This sense of gratuity is highly significant because it brings us closer to the notion of “pleasure of thinking” by consolidating the vision of a system of rapports between the faculties which cuts across the hierarchical principles we inertially tend to superimpose, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as in our own, on the organization of the human mind.

From the perspective of the present approach, by relativizing the hierarchy of the faculties and by problematizing their patterns of interaction the Kantian vision creates the possibility of conceptualizing and circumscribing the cognitive *potential* of literary criticism. The *Critique of judgment* opens what we could denote with a consecrated term of the contemporary cognitivist vocabulary a new “mental space” (Fauconier, 2010: 351), coexisting with the one of the hierarchical-aristocratic order of cognition. An alternative cognitive space presumed to be governed not by anarchy, but rather by a civic-republican order of the faculties.

But beside this general principle, of particular interest is the multitude of formulae used by Kant in order to express this co-involvement of faculties that interact in the emergence of what we chose to term “pleasure of thinking”. The most popular of these formulae is, probably, “harmony”. Kant borrows the term from an already validated philosophical vocabulary, by reworking the concept, pervasive in the disputations of the epoch but obviously more limited, of “harmony of the senses” (Erhardt-Sieboldt, 1932). But the conceptual widening thus obtained came at a price, the use of the notion of “harmony of faculties” proving to be, in Paul Guyer’s words, „less than lucid”. The reason invoked by Guyer in support of his evaluation is the semantic blur exercised by the competing metaphor of “mutual assistance” between the faculties, a metaphor that comes out in the eighth part of the *First Introduction*:

[...] Kant says that the feeling of pleasure which is the “ground of determination” for an aesthetic judgment of reflection is “effected [*bewirkt*] in the subject” by the “harmonious play of judgment’s two faculties of cognition, imagination and understanding,” and this state is defined as that in which “in a given representation the former’s power of apprehension and the latter’s power of presentation are mutually assisting each other [*einander wechselseitig beförderlich sind*]” (Guyer, 1997: 77).

It is quite obvious that “harmonious play”, “harmony”, “free play”, “comparison”, all of them “between faculties”, are not exactly the same thing as their above-mentioned “mutual assistance”. It is possible, to wit probable that for Kant these terms were more or less synonymous (or at least contextually synonymous). But this doesn’t change the fact that their specific nuances can grow into discreetly centrifugal semantic differences.

I propose that this diversified terminology can be seen as the expression of objectively differentiated patterns of interaction between the faculties. I hold it as obvious that the co-exercise of the cognitive faculties calls for a phenomenology of the forms of connection/contact, going from synchronization and interference, to indetermination, suspension of differences, “elective affinities”, or a mutually refreshing “estrangement”. All the Kantian terms mentioned above deserve a careful analysis because, in my hypothesis, even if they were not intended as such by their author, they still lead to different walks of specifying the pleasure of thinking as one of the founding processes of our cognitive experience and identity. A process that could be further considered as the deep structure that supports the historically contingent social-cultural surface-structure embodiments of literary criticism.

In the following section of the present paper I will try to test this assumption by focusing on one of the terms used by Kant in order to denote the basic patterns of interaction of the cognitive faculties within the aesthetic experience. The term chosen for

this little experiment is, by extrapolating from Kant's own phrasing, the one of *wechselseitige Beförderlichkeit*, or, in Paul Guyer's translation, the one of "mutual assistance".

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In the eighth Section of the First Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* pleasure is defined as

a *state* of the mind in which a representation is in harmony with itself, as the ground, either simply for preserving itself (for the condition of mutual assistance among faculties of the mind in a representation does preserve itself), or for bringing forth its object (translated in Guyer, 1997: 70).

The above-mentioned "representation" is "in harmony with itself" because, it is assumed, the actions of the faculties that make it possible are fully convergent. Let us keep in our minds the highly significant ratio posited in the above passage between the manner in which Kant conceives of the mental faculties as granting themselves "mutual assistance", and the notion of self-preservation (actually this "lucrative" consensus of the faculties represents, as Guyer comments on his own translation of the Kantian phrase, not only a definition of the nature of pleasure, but also a presentation of its *effects* – Guyer, 1997: 70). The very fact that Kant uses the concept of pleasure opens a channel of communication with the philosophical-literary cognitivist theories concerned with analyzing the mechanisms of orientation and adaption (Tsur, 1992: 347-366; Freeman, 2010: 1181-1182). In our considerations of the interaction of faculties or categories of faculties implied in the exercise of taste, we will take advantage of this Kantian intimation of contemporary cognitivist perspectives.

Therefore, I will state that one of the manners in which we can conceive the totalization generated by the cooperation of faculties is to relate it to the idea of self-preservation as spontaneous *orientation* in the world. An "orientation in the world" which should not be seen as the monopoly of the biological sciences, of the experimental psychology or of the neurosciences, as long as a consistent phenomenological description of the process could equally be provided. A description, in other words, which posits the category of "experience" as original, thereby transcending the usual divide between the "sensitive" and the "supersensitive" (e.g. the analysis of the "transgressive" analogies between spatial and moral orientation in Taylor, 1992: 25-52 or Brudney, 2010: 317-322)

Under such circumstances, to speak about the integrative virtues of "spontaneity" and "attention" may provide a telling example of the manner in which the literary studies could contribute the insightfulness of a phenomenological, participatory perspective to the empirically-oriented attempts of extending the concepts and methods of the cognitive studies to the humanities (a possibility of cooperation explicitly acknowledge, for instance, in Brône & Vandaele, 2009: 8).

Consequently, let us concentrate on the condition that I choose to call *the experience of the compass needle*, the metaphor resting on the assumption that spontaneous orientation could be poetically equated with a state in which one is brought to feel what a compass needle feels under its irrepressible impulse of pointing the North. Actually, I propose that we should concentrate on the purely subjective dimension and quality of the spontaneous

orientation in the world, on, to allude to the title for the present contribution, how it might feel to be a compass needle.

In order to obtain this phenomenological focus, we have to put aside the obvious antinomy generated by the fact that, on the one hand, such an experience can be construed as one of total exo-determination (to pursue in the walk of the compass metaphor: what authority could exert itself in a more compelling way than that of an all-including magnetic field?), and, oppositely, as one of endo-determination, of total autonomy (because the speed of the needle's reaction, almost annihilating space and time, confers it a charisma of existential attention/tuning that cannot actually be detached from the subjective experience of freedom).

I choose to concentrate on the subjective, experiential dimension of spontaneous orientation in order to elucidate its connection with our major topic, the pleasure of thinking. The question we should ask is: in what way this heightened state of attention supposed to expose an inner sense of spontaneous ordering, could be conceived, at the same time, as a form of *cognition* and as a form of *pleasure*. In other words, to what extent the vital mechanisms (summative with respect to the mental faculties) of the mobilization of the attention are compatible with the mechanisms of *taste* – a notion by which we choose to indicate the cognitive potential, anthropologically speaking, of literary criticism.

Since our main reference is to *experience*, we should ask the question whether, beyond the empirically-determined spontaneous orientation, our reflective consciousness is able to form a *representation* of adaptive spontaneity. Were such an experience distilled in notions and concepts, the quality of spontaneity would be completely lost. Were it to dwell at the level of sensory perception, it would be wholly contained in the infra-consciousness. Therefore, the only way in which spontaneous self-orientation could become present to itself is in the form of what Kant calls a cognition “without the use of a concept” (Guyer, 75).

The pre-Kantian philosophers had also something important to contribute to the question of spontaneity. The very manner in which they conceived the “natural” aesthetic response could be equated with an embedded theory of spontaneity. The pioneering empiricists agreed that the aesthetic pleasure represents an instinctual reaction that we share with the animal kingdom. Referring to the ground of the experiences that we have with the beautiful, Lord Kames plainly stated that “we have a sense or conviction of a common nature, not only in our own species, but in every species... This common nature is conceived to be a model or standard for each individual that belongs to the kind” (quoted in Guyer, 1997: 5). As for the essentially physical nature of aesthetic emotions, we find it asserted in no other place than the allegedly pre-Romanticist Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, where the Beautiful is said to act “by relaxing the solids of the whole system... and relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems ... to be the cause of all positive pleasures” (ibid.).

Even if the apparent empiricist overrating of natural spontaneity in the field of aesthetics could raise a wide range of objections, we should accept the fact that it is intrinsic to the empiricist cognitive theory as a whole. If we search for powerful representations of an emerging totalization as a spontaneous orientation in the world, we should confide ourselves in the inquiries of Locke and, to an even greater extent, of Hume. For this line of thought, the reflection on causes, finalities, substances and

ultimate nature is situated on a virtual and “protected” level, which is not affected (or, better said, which only emerges when it manages to keep itself unaffected) and which is equally non-affecting the level of the actual existence. With the latter being autonomously governed by the principle of the spontaneous ordering.

In other words, one could fully count on a general equilibrium of nature as a highly effective safety net, and one could equally count on the historical addition of experience, on a collective memory generated and supported by an adaptive process that we would call today *trial and error*. Together with this classical view of nature as the overall order of things and as an arch-equilibrium (an equilibrium of equilibriums), this collective memory is another instantiation of the principle of spontaneous order, able to vouchsafe the predictability of everyday life and to match the most various challenges to self-preservation with the most rapid and adequate, even if “ready-made” practical solutions. Philosophy, which is supposed to analyze and decompose, is particularly ill-suited as an instrument of direct intervention in the world, which seems to be a place where the only effective balances rest on the exercise of basic reflexes, longly trained and refined by experience.

The question is whether between being completely immersed in “spontaneity”, being fused with it and therefore in the impossibility of construing it as an object of perception/intellection, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, being able to analyze this spontaneity from a philosophical perspective we could imagine an interface, a buffer zone, something suggesting an intermediary state arrested into becoming a condition to itself. It is only such a hypothetical state that could allow for an experience of a self-aware pleasure deeply rooted in the self-awareness of the capacity (translatable in terms of potentiality/power) of a spontaneous, instinctual orientation in the world.

The notion elaborated by the early modernity in order to cope with this question is the one of “spirit”. Better known, and indeed included in the modern vocabulary of cosmopolitanism, in its French (original) form, as *esprit*. In fact, a re-elaborated notion, since it represents the obvious secular and playful mutation of one of the key-concepts of the Christian theology. Let’s see what *esprit* means in the understanding of Voltaire, one of the major minds that contributed to the crystallization and the popularity of the notion. The following fragment is part of the article “Esprit” of the *Encyclopédie* (1775, t. v, p. 973) and was republished by Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*:

This word, since it expresses a quality of the soul, is one of these vague terms to which those who utter them tend more often than not to attach different meanings: it expresses something else than judgment, genius, taste, talent, power of penetration, or of liberal apprehension, grace, refinement, but it has to join in itself all these merits; actually we could define it as ingenious reason (quoted in Fumaroli, 1994: 287, my translation).

This elegant but vague definition is detailed by Marc Fumaroli in the following manner:

What Voltaire calls spirit or ingenious reason is first of all this rapidity of invention, equally oral and written, which allows the improviser to answer to the point [*à propos*] in conversation, as well as giving him the length of breath necessary to compose an extended text in the fire of a literary polemic (Fumaroli, 1994: 299, my translation).

Starting from this tradition of training the „spirit” into the distillation of the instinct of adaptive orientation we could reconsider the stern depreciation of the “mechanical” condensed in the very popular definition of laughter given by the French philosopher Henri Bergson ([1900] 2012). According to this *fin-de-siècle* intuitionist, laughter is the reaction to the “*mécanique plaqué sur du vivant*”. That is to say: to what is perceived as a direct impression of the “mechanical” on the “living”. In Bergson’s view, the “mechanical” is utterly laughable because our deepest sense-of-sense knows that it represents the degeneration, to wit the caricature of the “living” (Parkin, 2006: 114-115). In the sphere we try to approximate here, that of the spontaneous orientation in the world, the equivalent of the “mechanical” is provided by the instinctive inter-operability and the spontaneous convergence of the faculties in the tension of attention (a process which seems equivalent to the tuning of a being completely equipped for adaption with its potentially hostile environment – potentially hostile, since the very “charisma” of self-protective attention implies the possibility of threats). This form of adaptive mechanics is equally *plaqué sur du vivant*, but not in the sense of being inadequately supplanted or forced upon it, but in that of being absorbed in or harmonized with it. This inner experience might be rendered more intuitive if we refer it to those numerous experiments of the historical and contemporary avant-gardes fascinated with the possibility of conceiving the mechanical/technological as completely fused with and consequently indistinct from the “living” (Dinescu, 2007).

The “mechanics” of the instinctive orientation in the world could be best re-evaluated by translating it as spontaneity. The pleasure generated by this spontaneity is associated with the orientation towards opportunities, a process that, for a phenomenological cast of mind (e.g. for the Romanian personalist philosopher Mihai Șora) could be understood as seizing the “freshness” of the world (Șora, 1978). As a species of cognition, spontaneity presupposes the synthesis between order and freedom, and the activation of an aesthetical (or aesthetically-compatible) sensitivity to form in general. A sensitivity to form that comes from the acute perception and the intensive mental elaboration (in a regime of cooperation and coordination of the faculties) of the spectrum of possibilities (i.e. of the *con-figuration* of this spectrum, given by the mutual *positionings* of its constitutive possibilities – hence the dimension of training for the perception of *form*) which opens up in front of the necessity to take action.

By virtue of the fact that it is built on (or is traversed by) different possible scenarios, spontaneity implies (under the sign of the Kantian integration-of-the-manifold delivered by intuition) the assimilation in the decision-making processes of a quasi-sensory (and potentially pleasurable) experience of the *possible*. By which we do not imply the secondary space of contemplative virtuality of classical empiricism, but the logical possibility lived as a state of acute attention. As a vibration of attention able to describe and re-describe in real time its own aggregation in a given state of fact. Although, the experience of the compass needle represents an *in actu* cognitive-pleasurable totalization, due to an intensive coordination of the faculties, of the virtual and the real.

The experience of spontaneity translates into an experience of the pleasure of thinking also to the extent that it conveys the reassuring feeling of being naturally endowed, in the fullest measure, for managing unpredictability and uncertainty. The state of “active latency” of the consciousness of one’s own perceptual, intellectual, and emotional capacities could naturally grow into an ethos of self-confidence. Which is



highly significant also for giving substance to the hypothesis of a relationship of mutual conditioning between the configuration of the personal identity and the development of the self-reflective capacity of exercising cognitive instruments and faculties.

The spontaneous orientation in the world implies a convergence, or active co-presence of a *transactional* nature of the cognitive faculties and, at the same time, a condensation *without blending* of these faculties into what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has called the “punctual self” (Taylor, 1992: 160) and the Romanian poet and literary theoretician Alexandru Mușina, “presentified” or “empirical I” (Mușina, 1997: 165-8, 174-5). Actually, to understand the phenomenology of intuition implies the representation of a condition of oscillation between a concentration *on* an external object of attention and a concentration/containment *in* one’s self, which could also be presented as an oscillation (or “comparison”) between self-preservation and self-centering.

This type of relationship/interaction is closest to the Kantian notion of the “mutual assistance” the mental faculties are supposed to grant each other. It is my assumption that literary criticism is made possible by this spontaneous disposition of thinking that sets the premises for the experience of autonomy, self-containment and cognitive self-confidence.

In order to really understand the cognitive potential of literary criticism we have to start from the fact that it presupposes the transfer of the experience of spontaneous orientation, with all its “natural” and “vital” vibrations, to the virtual and simulated environment offered by literature. The very nature of *style*, central to our traditional representation of literary criticism and commonly described as personalized linguistic deviation, can be better accounted for as a condition of permanent adaptive approximation. Which of course leaves open the possibility of a wider perspective on style as the coherent integration of *various* adaptive modulations, and as an upgraded level of the adaption process implying the self-awareness of mental spontaneity.

We could also seize this opportunity for noticing that the theoreticians who pity the experiences we have with the natural world against those we have with the virtual world, asking themselves, for instance, under what circumstances the border between the two tends to be suspended (e.g. Lévy, 1995; Ryan, 1997; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) could find an extremely relevant body of evidence in the century-long (to say the least) practice of literary criticism. A practice which, from the thematic perspective that we adopted in the present paper, can be construed as a derivation of the natural experience of spontaneous orientation (but also of the self-training for spontaneous orientation) within the particular kind of virtual environment constituted by the “world” of a literary text.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This, of course, providing that we accept the premises that texts represent rather than internal networks of semantic connections, possible “worlds,” in the logical and philosophical meaning of the notion. This debate, from the perspective of literary theory, is resumed in Pavel 1989, and, from an officially-philosophical perspective, in Gibson 2007.

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