

## Literature as a Meaningful Life Laboratory

Dmitry Kurakin

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**Abstract** Meaningful life is emotionally marked off. That's the general point that Johansen (IPBS: Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science 44, 2010) makes which is of great importance. Fictional abstractions use to make the point even more salient. As an example I've examined Borges' famous fiction story. Along with the examples of Johansen it provides an informative case of exploring symbolic mechanisms which bind meaning with emotions. This particular mode of analysis draws forth poetry and literature in general to be treated as a "meaningful life laboratory". Ways of explanation of emotional effect the art exercises on people, which had been disclosed within this laboratory, however, constitute a significant distinction in terms that I have designated as "referential" and "substantive". The former appeals to something that has already been charged with emotional power, whereas the latter comes to effect by means of special symbolic mechanisms creating the emotional experience within the situation. Johansen, who tends to explain emotions exerted by the art without leaving the semiotic perspective, is drawn towards the "referential" type of explanation. Based upon discussions in theory of metaphor and Robert Witkin's sociological theory of arts it is demonstrated an insufficient of "referential" explanation. To overcome a monopoly of "referential" explanation of emotional engagement, in particular, in literature, means to break away from the way of reasoning, stating endless references to "something else", presupposing the existence of something already significant and therefore sharing its effects.

**Keywords** Emotion · Meaning · Memory · Sacred · Metaphor · Aesthetic · Symbolic · Perceptual mode · Arts · Poetic device

Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself.

It is in some such sense and in some such connection as this that we think of the city as a social laboratory.

Robert Park, "The City as a Social Laboratory"

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D. Kurakin (✉)

Centre for Fundamental Sociology, State University—Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia  
e-mail: kourakine@gmail.com

## Emotion, Meaning and Memory

What differentiates the meaningful order of human life of any given cybernetic system? One of possible answers is its ability to invoke an emotional response from human beings. That response could be expressed in various different ways: by implying immediate action; by experiencing delight or uneasiness, being shared with others, or not; by religious illumination; or by contemplation about and immersion in art. In short, meaningful life is emotionally marked. That's the general point of Johansen (2010) that is of great importance. In order to take an effect meanings have to be emotionally charged. Emotions are not something just existing "in addition" to meanings. They are an immanent to cultural order. As an example, let's take into consideration the problem of memory. Memory is not indifferent to its own substance. We are not emotionally neutral about what we do remember. We do remember mostly what is remarkable, i.e. making us emotionally respond. It provides not just a script, but rather reading.

Fictional abstractions which draw memory as an imprint of reality make the point even more salient. Funes, the hero of the novel written by Jorge Luis Borges, said to remember everything experienced (Borges 1962 [1942]). His fabulous memory covers inner experiences as well as outer. He remembers not even every leaf of any tree ever seen, but every time he thought about it. Borges' fantasy draws upon the cybernetic universe of stored experiences. What is interesting here is that Funes is not supposed to be a genius—or even clever. To think, Borges insists, one has to be able to forget. Thanks to his gift, Funes was incapable of many important thought operations, such as generalization and resuming. Stating this, Borges is putting us off track. Someone could get it as the problem of unbearable complexity, informational overflow of Funes' life world. But that's not the case. To find out the truth we have to put it in other terms. What does it mean to remember everything? That means to set all the things as equally important. Any sensation in his world had been ranked with others, without stresses and hierarchy: "It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front)" (Borges 1962 [1942], p. 114). The true Funes' problem is he hadn't means of distinguishing. It is not oblivion itself that provides that means. Rather it is the reasons of being remembered that should be examined. Understood properly, Borges' text gives us a hint about those reasons.

As a matter of fact the substance of Funes' gift was an illness. The illness manifested itself in constant unsettling intensity of his life. His experience was "instantaneously and almost intolerably exact"; he "felt the heat and pressure of a reality as indefatigable"; his recollections said to be "more lively than our perception of a physical pleasure or a physical torment"; it was difficult for him to sleep because of inability to be abstracted from contemplation of the world (Ibid.). In other words, the life of Funes was filled with emotional tension of high and, what is more important, permanent intensity. Normally emotions use to distinguish human experience. Funes was unable to organize meanings by means of emotions, not because of their absence but because of their continuous presence.

What Borges actually shows is that human memory which set as a cybernetic system without emotions as the means of distinguishing causes of impossibility of thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Comparing Funes' memory with a computer it leads us to another flash of inspiration. The computers we deal with belong to a class of discrete state machines. In other words, any given moment in time, a machine can be described exhaustively in terms of one of its clear valid states. That means those machines do not experience any kind of uncertainty or ambiguity. People do. It is remarkable that C.S. Peirce whose emotional concern to the problem of meaning-making had been fruitfully adopted by Johansen, shows very clearly that thinking itself owes to debts or, in other words, uncertainty, in a fundamental way (Peirce 1992 [1878]). It's no coincidence that emotions and uncertainty go along. In many ways it has been shown that uncertainty appeared to be a general source of high intensity emotions.<sup>2</sup> There are plenty of simple examples. Uncertainty about the morality and immorality of someone's actions or motives is often treated with anger and abhorrence. Ugliness within the beautiful inspires disgust. Uncertainty about what is known and unknown is used to excite curiosity. As luck would have it, Borges informs us about how Funes used to deal with that particular kind of uncertainty:

“Toward the east, in a section which was not yet cut into blocks of homes, there were some new unknown houses. Funes imagined them black, compact, made of a single obscurity; he would turn his face in this direction in order to sleep” (Borges 1962 [1942], p. 115).

Unlike ordinary human beings uncertainty seems to be for Funes the only way to hide from the intensity of sensations and pressure of memory. And, again, that particular emotional extremum does not create any event and, hence, does not provide any kind of distinction. I suppose this life intensity mapping to be the key to Funes' riddle. The true nature of Funes' illness is he was inverted emotionally. The trick is, though, inverted emotions lose their ability to distinguish meanings.

### Poetry as Meaningful Life Laboratory

The great advantage of fiction for social sciences is that it carries manifestations of people's deep ideas of the nature, things taken for granted and profoundly rooted accounts of themselves. Any successful fiction story which used to amaze us attains the aim by means of an explicit or hidden violation of some of those ideas. Finding the violations which are marked by our amazing we learn about the ideas. It was demonstrated by Johansen, that poetry gives a scholar an even more clear and informative example of emotional effect on meaning and its mechanisms. The questions he uses to examine concern perception of literature but at the same time and more widely problems of meaning-making, feelings and emotions in human life.

<sup>1</sup> It's should be marked, however, that to provide thinking-like operations there could be another means of distinction. For example, it could be the formal logic, implemented via technical devices. I'm not intending to discuss the problem of artificial intellect here, though.

<sup>2</sup> The most important conceptions concerning my reasoning are the works of Mary Douglas (1988 [1966]), Rene Girard (1995 [1967]) and Victor Turner (1969).

How certain poetic devices work? What are the relationships between the intellectual and the non-intellectual in a poem? How are poetic texts used to provide emotional engagement and manipulate our feelings? How poetry combines meaning and emotion? How do modes of perception of fiction relate to other modes of communication? Moving from particularly literature questions put by Johansen to those concerning meaningful life in general it is possible to come to see the literary as a meaningful life laboratory, which makes it possible to observe purified situations of strong emotional involvement within concrete meaningful structures in order to disclose those mechanisms.

Seeing music, literature, painting and the aesthetic sphere as a philosophical laboratory of life is not alien for social science accounts of art. In particular, it used to be an essential metaphor for critical theory and especially for new left analysis of the avant-garde. The point here is to turn the logic of explanation from the interpretation of the art through a pre-given understanding of social life to the arts as a privileged source of knowledge on social life. Because it stems from reciprocity of metaphor, the decisive question here is what is to be seen as more transparent for a social scientist. Applying metaphor of laboratory to the case of the city, Robert Park supposes it to be “an advantageous place to study social life...” because of

“...the fact that in the city every characteristic of human nature is not only visible but is magnified. <...> The city magnifies, spreads out, and advertises human nature in all its various manifestations. It is this that makes the city interesting, even fascinating. It is this, however, that makes it of all places the one in which to discover the secrets of human nature, and to study human nature and society” (Park 1967: 18 [1929]).

The same could be said of poetry. It contains the same mechanisms that bound meaning and emotions but being reinforced and thus more clear. That is the reason why poetry appears to be both fascinating and informative. It is magnetic because it is magnifying. And it is indicative because magnifying clarifies. An instructive example is provided by Johansen in the analysis of one of William Blake’s poems, namely “The Question Answered”.

Johansen makes it clear how poetic devices and their interplay work in the emotional charging of meanings. He describes the work of the three kinds of analogy which are phonological, syntactic and semantic. He demonstrates how the poetic form mimes its substance: the interplay of rhythm and euphony in Blake’s poem represent settled symmetry between men and women’s desires. Finally, he recognizes the poem’s connection with the pre-literary genre of the riddle. That is one more poetic device disclosed by Johansen which is most important for me, since it can be useful in stating an important dilemma.

### **“Substantial” vs. “Referential” Explanations of Emotional Effect of the Poetry**

How exactly does a poem succeed in gaining power by means of imitating of a solving the riddle? “To solve the riddle—Johansen specifies—is to unveil a secret and, according to magical thinking, may mean the acquisition of great, sometimes superhuman, power (cf. Oedipus solving the riddle of the Sphinx)” (Johansen 2010). This brings us directly

towards the problem of the sacred. Connection to the sacred is known to provide a strong emotional effect. The problem is how we are going to treat that very connection? Is it effective (i.e. causes emotional effect of the poem) because it refers to something that has already been charged with great emotional power, like Oedipus case, including all supplementing psychoanalysis connotations? Alternatively, does it come to effect by means of special symbolic mechanisms creating the experience of the sacred *ex nihilo*, experience that is common for religious practice, magical thinking, aesthetic inspiration and meaningful life in general? My position is the first should not be overestimated while neglecting the second.

The dilemma is akin to the problem of whether the sacred should be treated as an exclusive religious phenomenon or it is to be seen as a general feature of human's nature. It was Emile Durkheim who provided the key for the latter in social sciences. Apart from seeing the sacred as a sign of pre-given religious beliefs he had disclosed symbolic mechanisms of creating the sacred through particular social interactions.<sup>3</sup> That means the reference to the sacred is not the only way to produce its emotional effects. The base for disclosing those mechanisms of creating the sacred in social practice is Durkheim's hypothesis on emotion. Durkheim's claim is that there are emotions of a special kind exist, which are, firstly, social by origin; secondly, extraordinarily intense; and thirdly—the first implies the second. What is important here is that Durkheim's theory of the sacred and the consequent symbolic mechanisms allow explanation of the way meaningful structures of social life are connected to emotions within social practice. Thereby, the way of explanation that could be called "substantive" should be opposed to the "referential" one.

The problem discussed is stated within theory of metaphor. The cutting edge here is overcoming pure semiotic perspective and enriching metaphor with emotional dimension. As a matter of fact since the Aristotelian classical definition and through the centuries metaphor was treated as a subject of rhetoric and, later, semiotics. During the course metaphor had been persistently understood as a means of symbolic transfer, or, in other words, a reference. A famous example from the writing of Max Black runs as follows: "man is a wolf" (Black 1962). That reference to a wolf's attributes (power, aggression, readiness to fight) allows man to acquire some seductive qualities. That is the "referential" explanation of the emotional effect of the metaphor. Poetry analysis includes plenty examples of this kind. It was Paul Ricoeur who has opposed such a plain treatment of metaphor and transcended the semiotic perspective. He has shown that separating metaphorical mechanisms from peculiar emotional effects allows us to miss how metaphor actually works. In such a way he came to see metaphor immanently combined with emotions, iconicity, corporality and imagination (Ricoeur 1978).

To provide an example of "substantial" explanation let us take into consideration Victor Turner's account of metaphorical structure of a Virasaiva religious poem. Virasavia is a Hindu religious movement in many aspects similar to Protestantism in Europe, studied by E.K. Ramanujan, Turner's colleague shared his theory of structure and anti-structure. The

<sup>3</sup> The theory reviewed had been developed by Durkheim mostly in his later works, such as "Elementary forms of religious life" (Durkheim 1995), "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions" (Durkheim 1973), the course of lectures on pragmatism (Durkheim 1983) and other writings.

theory describes two principal modes of social interactions and human experience. Structure corresponds with state of symbolic order, worship of the sacred and social consensus. Anti-structure is the creative mode of denying an order, desecration and crossing symbolic borders which corresponds to violence, uncertainty and liminality, making disorder possible but also any cultural establishment and renewal. What is most important for my reasoning here, is that described mechanisms intrinsically connect words and meaning with emotional modes of behavior and communication. The discussed example is as follows:

The rich  
will make temples for Siva.  
What shall I,  
the poor man,  
do?  
My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine.  
the head a cupola  
Of gold.  
Listen, O Lord of the meeting rivers,  
things standing shall fall,  
but the moving ever shall stay. (Ramanujan 1973: 19, Turner 1975: 281).

Where Turner succeeds, owing to his theory, is by disclosing inner devices of emotional engagement stemming from structure and anti-structure modes of social life. The struggle between the first and the second as well as the triumph of anti-structure is developed by oppositions of “making” and “being”, “standing” and “moving”, or, in Sanskrit terms, “sthavara” and “gangama”. The point here is the words do not refer to anti-structure, but rather implement it, bring it into being. In addition, as Ramanujan shows, the poem dramatizes the theme of Virasaiva’s critique of Hindu orthodoxy by means of highlighting that temples which their construction originated in human’s body use to lose that connection: “The temple becomes a static standing thing that has forgotten its moving originals” (Ramanujan 1973: 20). Altogether it provides strong emotional concern based upon the emotional energy of uncertainty by the liminal stage of human behavior.

### **Consequences of Overcoming the Monopoly of the “Referential” Explanation**

To point out insufficiency of “referential” way of explanation of emotional effect in literature leads to some important conclusions. In application to the Johansen’s paper I am going to mention one of those, and briefly observe another closely related to the first. The first is as follows. Emotions experienced by characters in poetry and fiction tend to imply the reader’s emotions. The question is: does the former induce the latter directly, or what empathy corresponds with is just a particular case? In accordance with the “substantive” way of reasoning I lean towards the latter.

The second conclusion makes an objection to Johansen’s opposition of literature and music because of the predicated difference in mechanisms of signification.

Johansen claims that literature provides emotional engagement mostly because of “our empathy with others and our constant imagining and hypothesizing on possible developments in our interactions with them” (Johansen 2010). Music, in turn, is incapable of such an engagement because of the absence of language equally shared by the audience. According to Johansen, in the case of music “we have a semiotic that lacks reference to the external world” (Ibid.). Music reveals its reference in the very feelings it uses to invoke.

My thesis here elucidates the difference in emotional effects between music and literature, even if that’s the case, it should not be explained by means of pointing out objects of reference. To clarify my vision it is useful to refer to Robert Witkin’s sociological theory of arts. General logic of his reasoning has important things in common with the way which Peirce explains the accordance of division of interpretant to categories of perception. Witkin develops the idea of three forms of “abstraction” (corresponding with certain types of social interaction) which manifest themselves in three perceptual modes (Witkin 2005). Those forms change evolutionally following social changes. In turn, history of the arts reflects the replacement of perceptual modes. The first form of abstraction is “coaction” which is connected with haptic or tactile perceptual modes as a dominant way of representation in the arts. That means objects are represented directly and plainly as if being touched. The second form is called “interaction”; it corresponds with the transition from the traditional world to modernity. The perceptual form represents objects as if being seen. Being less naive as compared with the haptic form, the “optic” mode of perception still retains clear reference to the object of representation in the outer world. Contemporary form of abstraction, “intra-action”, reveals itself in the art of the modernity. The “somatic” perceptual mode that corresponds to it captures “not the object as such (the object of contact values), or the object as seen (the object of distal values) but the seeing of the object seen (the object of proximal values); the subject at this level of abstraction takes his or her own sensing as the object of perceptual attention” (Witkin 2006: 44).

Taking into consideration the theory of Witkin which is well established and affirmed with wide empirical material, the two cases described by Johansen seem to represent different perceptual modes. Music with its reference to its very perception represents a higher form of abstraction, whereas literature as it appears in Johansen’s reasoning obviously belongs to the second, “classical” stage. It is no wonder thereupon that we find literary of the eighteen-nineteen century as examples. Had we taken as an example, say, *The Breasts of Tiresias* by Guillaume Apollinaire, the result would surely be quite different. Resuming the argument, specifying the reference between art and its object by oneself does not involve exhaustive explanation of the emotional effect it exercises on people.

To overcome a monopoly of “referential” explanation of emotional engagement, in particular, in literature, means to break off from a way of reasoning, stating endless references to “something else”, presupposing the existence of something already significant and therefore sharing its effects. Moving along those chains of references we run risks of discovering nothing in the long run. What is important here is to develop substantial models of emotional charge in meaning, which in turn are able to make sense of those chains of references.

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**Dmitry Kurakin** is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Fundamental Sociology (CFS), State University—Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia), head of the Cultural Sociology Research Group (at the CFS), and Faculty Fellow of the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology