Introduction: Contemporary Fiction and Consciousness

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Could we not conceive of a reality which would be like a thick fog – and nothing else, no solids, no movement? Or perhaps like a fog with certain changes in it – rather indefinite changes of light, for example? Of course, by my very attempt to describe this world I have shown that it can be described in our language, but this is not to say that any such world could be so described. [...] In fact I believe that we are all most intimately acquainted with a world that cannot be properly described by our language [...]. The indescribable world I have in mind is, of course, the world I have “in my mind” – the world which most psychologists (except the behaviourists) attempt to describe, somewhat unsuccessfully, with the help of what is nothing but a host of metaphors taken from the language of physics, of biology, and of social life.

Karl R. Popper (213)

Karl Popper, one of the greatest philosophers of science, admits that science (and language), when challenged with the mystery of consciousness, fails. Indeed, while there is no denying the great progress science has made in understanding the world of nature (irrespective of one’s assessment of the value of technological transformations that have accompanied it), the human mind has remained by and large a mystery. It has so far proved impossible to identify the physical substratum of one’s decision to open a game of chess by moving the knight, the quale of pavement showered with rain on a hot day, or the memory of the last night’s nightmare (though it is possible to identify some areas of the brain activated in each case). Science, in other words, has not provided a (physical) explanation of subjective experience yet, and it seems that even if it has had some success as regards analysing specific mental processes (such as speech or memory), it has so far been totally unable to identify the physical structures or processes corresponding to what is subjectively experienced as free will, stream of consciousness or self.
There are many reasons why investigating mental experience is so difficult: the lack of appropriate language (noted by Popper), the uniqueness, fluidity, and privacy of subjective experience (not accessible from without),\(^1\) the closeness (verging on identity) of the subject and object of investigation (the mind investigating itself), the impact of research on the state of the object, difficulties involved in formulating predictions and conducting experiments where human beings are concerned, and the like. Philosophers who believe that the traditional concept of consciousness is misconceived, like Daniel Dennett or Susan Blackmore, might, in turn, say that it is the absence of the object of investigation, the self or free will that is the principal difficulty. However, on the assumption that they are mistaken, it seems most fortunate that science in its exploration of the mind has from the start been complemented with art – indeed, of the two, art is the more ancient.

For this is how art may also be interpreted: as a non-scientific cognitive project. As John Fowles argues,

> The practice and experience of art is as important to man as the use and knowledge of science. These two great manners of apprehending and enjoying existence are complementary, not hostile. The specific value of art for man is that it is closer to reality than science; that it is not dominated as science must be, by logic and reason; that it is therefore essentially a liberating activity. (159)

The novelist also recognizes art’s particular predispositions as regards exploring the self: “All artefacts please and teach the artist first, and other people later. The pleasing and teaching come from the explanation of self by the expression of self; by seeing the self, and all the selves of the whole self, in the mirror of what the self has created” (132). David Lodge connects this kind of self-examination in particular with literature, which for him is “a kind of knowledge about consciousness which is complementary to scientific knowledge” (16).

More systematically, art’s cognitive potential as regards consciousness might be described in terms of the four main functions: (1) offering the recipient access to the artist’s subjective experience, whether expressed in the guise

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\(^1\) Cf. Thomas Nagel’s thought experiment, presented in his essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat,” whose point is that consciousness, being subjective, cannot possibly be studied within the paradigm of science, from the outside, as if it were another object accessible for objective investigation.