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Empirical Studies of Literature:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface 1

Opening Address: An oral introduction 3
Elrud Ibsch

Empirical studies in literature and the media: Perspectives for the nineties 9
Siegfried J. Schmidt

Questions of method 19
Pierre Bourdieu

READING

Expert readers before 'Before the law' 39
Els Andringa

Unity in the esthetic process 49
Gerald C. Cupchik

Associations in the reading process 57
Cay Dollerup

'Going on the word': An aspect of fundamentalist text practice 67
Per-Anders Forstorp

Effect and reminding in literary text processing 79
László Halász

Linguistic competence and poetic text processing 87
Petra Hoffstaedter-Kohn

Of all identificatory methods we know, the interview is the most direct and it is easy to handle for the teacher. From our experience in the classroom we learned that the students play this game seriously and appreciate it highly. There is no reason to prefer the identificatory method to a method of answering questions on form and content, but it has it's own effects and therefore it is an attractive variation on the more usual teaching methods.

SUBVERTING THE LITERARY SYSTEM: NONHEGEMONIC LITERARY SOCIALIZATION

Russell A. Hunt

Anyone who teaches literature, and anyone who is concerned with how literature is read in western societies, occupies a niche in an ecology which, following Siegfried Schmidt, we can call 'the literary system'. This system owes its origins to the changes in the social status and function of literature and the writer during the eighteenth century. Most of its characteristics first become visible during the Enlightenment, and are fully in place by the middle of the Romantic era. For about two centuries, then, writers, readers, publishers, teachers, booksellers, and libraries have inhabited an ecology of literacy which has steadily become both more elaborate and less visible. But as it is difficult for fish to be conscious of water, so it takes a deliberate effort of will for those of us who breathe in and are supported by this system to be very analytical about it. Even when we become conscious that such a system exists, we often see it only intermittently, unclearly, or incompletely. It is rare for anyone to give it the kind of extended examination that Schmidt and his colleagues have been engaging in.

I want here to consider some of the assumptions of that system which are most directly relevant to teachers and learners of literature - assumptions which most people take very much for granted in the late twentieth century, but which have important consequences for literary socialization, and for attitudes about and stances toward literacy itself.

These central assumptions can be found in almost any popular or educational text about literature or concerned with the experience of literature; indeed, most critical theory - even the most aggressively contemporary and skeptical critical theory - tacitly accepts the majority of these assumptions. I will not attempt to document instances here: it is my expectation that most people will recognize them as the currency of our common concern. It may be important, however, to make clear that I do not present them as *rules* or *necessities*; they represent, rather, the norm, what computer people

call the 'default mode': departures from them are likely to be notable - or, at any rate, noticed. I should also say that I do not mean to suggest that all these ideas are either false or destructive (though I would argue that we do not usually question them rigorously enough).

Here, then, are some assumptions about what defines *the literary* that seem to me to characterize the current literary system as it is conveyed or embodied in most literature classes, if not most literary scholarship and criticism, and which seem to me most directly relevant to the process of literary education.

(1) Some texts are literary.
(2) Literary is good.
(3) Literary is not practical or transactional, and thus not rhetorical.
(4) Literary is not communicative, but expressive.
(5) Literary is formally complex, highly structured and innovative, and thus difficult.
(6) Literary appeals to the emotions.
(7) Literary is and must be separated from authorial intention.
(8) Literary does not observe the 'fact convention'.
(9) Literary has many meanings rather than one.
(10) Literary must be interpreted.

I make no claims for the novelty of this list: virtually all the individual items on it have been pointed out by various theoreticians of literature and analysts of society. I am concerned here with the extent to which it may be possible for us, once they have been brought to our attention, to call them into question and to decide whether in fact they represent a state of affairs with which we are as entirely happy as our practice suggests we are.

One reason to question these assumptions is the growing consensus among reading and language researchers (not to mention partisans of constructivism) that what a text *is* is a function of what it is *seen to be*, and how it is seen is a function of what its reader expects, and of the situation the reader sees herself in. An obvious example of this phenomenon is the way a poem or play can be read as information, as, e.g., evidence of historical conditions; another is the 'found poem', in which a text which would not otherwise likely be seen as literary is framed in such a way as to promote *literary* reading. Or a powerful piece of dangerous political rhetoric can be

framed as 'belles lettres', and thus rendered effectively innocuous, by being brought into a classroom for analysis.

Another important reason we might question this set of assumptions has to do with the consequences of seeing the text as *esthetic*, which is to say, *impractical*. The text is thus in important ways disconnected from the practical world of our everyday lives. We do not presume that poems or novels are going to give us information (or, if they do - as, for instance, reading science fiction taught me what I know about Newton's mechanics - we think of that function as irrelevant to their nature or function as literature). Similarly, we assume literature is disconnected from immediate human dialogue. Some language calls for response, action, answer: literature, on the contrary, calls for contemplation; invites us not to act but to feel, not to do but to be. All these assumptions are, I think, connected to the broader belief that written language is radically different from spoken language, and that this difference lies mainly in written language being disconnected from social circumstances. They entail the assumption that the literary is not only necessarily 'written' (as opposed to oral), but that it intensifies or exaggerates the typical characteristics - especially permanence and decontextualizability - of 'ordinary' or 'everyday' written language.

It is important to note here that these assumptions, because of the socially constructed nature of the characteristics of literary texts, become self-fulfilling prophecies: if we assume, as we read, that the text we are dealing with *cannot* be practical, transactional, communicative or rhetorical, it is very unlikely to *be* any of those things for us. And if we train students to make such assumptions, literature will be read as profoundly decontextualized, as having no immediate relevance to the social world the students may know or care about. I do not suggest that this view is consciously accepted; indeed, many literature teachers insist that it is precisely its enduring relevance which makes literature special. But its relevance is always stipulated to be of a special kind: the student who becomes angry when Jonathan Swift suggests that people who voice anti-church views should be prosecuted, or who argues violently against the simplistic social views of a Steinbeck or Eliot, or the sexual ones of a Hemingway or Mailer, is usually advised to make a more sophisticated and less direct connection between the text's apparent implications and her own view of the world.

This set of assumptions about the decontextualization of literature is perhaps particularly under scrutiny at the present time in the

light of the growing influence of Bakhtin's view that all language, written or oral, is intrinsically and fundamentally dialogic, created in answer to a previous action or utterance, and in anticipation of answer and response; that language is read and understood as expecting response and in anticipation of responding.

There are at least two more practical reasons for which we might wish to consider the implications of this set of tacit beliefs about literature. One, from a larger sociopolitical perspective, suggests that to urge readers to take the kind of distanced, esthetic, evaluative perspective on literature which is implicit in such a view is to render literature safe - to sanitize, depoliticize, dehistoricize it, to take (for instance) Jonathan Swift's attack on scientific and social innovation in 'Gulliver' and make it a flashy display of ironic virtuosity, which cannot touch or be affected by our own convictions about the value of such innovation.

The second reason is less grandiose, but perhaps more important: the dominance of this set of beliefs in the classroom renders literature incomprehensibly distant for many - perhaps for most - students. The assumption that literary texts are to be taken as dramatically situated examples of language, applicable to the reader's world and values only by a elaborately complex and self-conscious decoding operation of interpretation, generalization and application, means that many students come to see reading as equivalent to literary study, which becomes equivalent in turn to a kind of dispassionate (and magical) extrication of interpretations ('hidden meanings') from innocent texts, like rabbits out of hats. (Many students do not recognize that the rabbits were put into the hats by the magician.) If we think of it as magic, we are powerless in the face of it. Again, of course, one practical question is whether literature teachers have any real choice. The nature of the situation in which they operate militates most strongly against taking texts seriously and immediately. Let me illustrate this by means of an analogy.

Think for a moment of literature as analogous to a collection of stories held in common by a culture - each story told originally by a storymaker, and repeated in more or less adapted form by others to whom the stories are meaningful and in the belief that they will be meaningful to their hearers in the new situations in which they are told. What renders these stories meaningful is a play of a number of factors; the shape and character of the original story, of course, but also the situation in which it is retold, and the understanding of both the story and the situation that is, or comes to be,

shared between the teller and the listener(s). Stories continue to be retold because tellers and hearers continue to be able to use them to convey their own meanings, meanings relevant to their own situations. When they cease to be useful in that way they cease to be retold. What a story *means* - in this it is exactly like any other unit of language, such as a word or a sentence - is dependent on the way in which its socially determined potential for meaning transacts with the teller's purposes, the listener's purposes, and the situation as constructed or understood by both teller and audience. Each time the story is told it is different, framed in a different way by a new teller, a new audience, and new circumstances.

The analogy should be fairly obvious: texts are those stories, and exchanges of texts - between one reader and another, between publishers and audiences, between teachers and students - are retellings. Each retelling is framed by its circumstances, and they shape its *meaning* in that instance. We borrow authors' words and phrases, sentences and chapters, characters and plots, just as (according to Bakhtin) we always borrow each others' language, and always struggle to wrest words from the discourse of others into our own speech, to convey our own meanings with them.

To bring the analogy back to the classroom: how is the text framed by its retelling in the usual literature class? For one thing, it usually appears in a textbook (or a book treated as a textbook), which denudes it of any effective social context, offering it as an isolated example of literary language. The framing authority (the institutions which created the textbook or the one which assigns it) is quite specifically *not* offering it as an expression of its own view about some subject or issue addressed by the text, and the response envisioned by the framing is a distanced, analytical, evaluative (and, almost certainly, appreciative) one; certainly not a rejoinder or a contradiction. The text becomes an adjunct to the maintenance of hegemony over the student by the teacher's representation of the dominant culture.

One alternative to this situation, it seems to me, is to take seriously the Bakhtinian model of all language as engaged dialogue, to see literature, like other forms of language, as utterance created out of certain specific human social contexts and recontextualizable in other human social contexts. To do this we must acknowledge that the aim of the institution of literature is not (or should not be) to create and encase in plastic a permanent museum showcase of static works of art but to foster conversation and argument - dialogue - among writers and texts and readers.

As so often, however, we come back to the practical question: are there actually workable ways to implement such an acknowledgment? I have described elsewhere some such alternatives. For instance, students in courses organized as collaborative investigations of literature - of particular periods or genres or patterns or authors - can be put in the position of discovering and exchanging texts themselves, of recommending readings to each other in social contexts which afford taking the texts in ways other than merely as examples of literary art. Students can read the texts in situations where their readings are not compared to an overarching, public, *true* reading (interpretation) offered by the teacher, or evaluated as more or less imaginative or ingenious than those of their peers, but in an attempt to negotiate among themselves appropriate responses to the text, exactly as we do with stories told in conversations. There are many ways to foster such reading. One practical way is to invite students to keep 'reading diaries' in the margins of the text, and to read and respond (in writing, also in the margin) to each others' diaries. Another is to ask students to respond to other students' choices of texts, and arguments for their choices, by proposing new arguments and other texts. Still another is to help students to generate their own questions about literature and texts rather than to accept those which textbook publishers or teachers pose, and to empower them to answer the questions for themselves and each other.

Students can, in other words, be put in the position of attempting to make the texts part of their own utterances, part of their own identities and lives, rather than being led past the sealed glass cases in the literary museum. I see in Schmidt's presentation of the evolution of this system not a description of a natural phenomenon like gravity or photosynthesis, which it is our job merely to understand, but an engaged analysis of an arbitrary set of social practices, one which the analysis reveals to be in many ways unjust and ultimately unacceptable. I see it as a call to action. As I said at the outset, literary professionals move in, breathe in, are supported by, a literary system as goldfish live in water. We need to understand and question that system; we need to ask ourselves whether it's one we want to continue to preserve.

CREATIVITY IN LITERARY SCHOLARS [1]

Mary Sue MacNealy

The source of creative energy has interested scholars since very ancient times when it was believed that creative activity began only after a visit from a muse. Since that time, theorists have sought less magical explanations ranging from Plato's idea that recollection was the source of knowledge and truth to such modern notions as that of cognitive psychologists D.H. Simonton (1988), who argues that creativity results from a chance permutation of certain mental elements, and Howard E. Gruber (1989), who sees creativity as a result of networks of enterprise. These and other theorists (Graesser 1989; Hayes 1978; McGuire 1989; White 1987; Young 1970) have benefited from empirical research into the question, which began around the middle of the last century (Subotnik and Moore 1988). In the last 13 to 15 years researchers have specifically investigated how artists, scientists, mathematicians, and even poets go about finding the problems they work on (Perkins 1981; Subotnik and Moore 1988).

However, no findings have been reported on the characteristics of problem finding behavior among literary scholars, yet knowledge of the characteristics of their creative behavior could help composition teachers to design more effective courses and assignments. Thus, this study focuses on the creative behavior of English professors, looking particularly at what impels these scholars to write on a particular topic and what questions they ask themselves once their mind is engaged on a particular problem. After describing the methodology of the study and illustrating the results, I will discuss how Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance fits the findings. Finally I will raise some questions about what these findings imply about teaching composition.

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[1] I am particularly indebted to Richard E. Young and Arthur C. Graesser for insights into the problem discussed in this study.