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**Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb**

Abstract:

Characteristic of the contemporary creative arts scene as it is deployed in universities is a false dichotomy between theory and practice. In the larger field of Literature, this is most obvious in the polarisation of Literary Studies from Creative Writing. As the title of my paper suggests, the tension between criticism and the arts, or theory and practice, is not new. It is indeed Northrop Frye who perpetuated the New Critics' misconception in viewing the mode of existence of the literary work as wholly self-enclosed and inaccessible to language by saying: 'Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb' (Frye 1957, 4). This paper sets out from the hypothesis that such false dichotomy is predicated upon the tension between intellectual and emotional elements in our aesthetic response to texts. It postulates that writers are first and foremost readers and hence can learn from their reading processes. It offers a brief history of this tension between intellect and emotion through the course of literary criticism and suggests that some reading paradigms may be useful to writers if informed by psychoanalysis.

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We are, at the core, reading animals and ... the art of reading, in its broadest sense, defines our species — Alberto Manguel

The characteristic discomfort experienced on the contemporary creative arts scene as it is deployed in universities in terms of a dichotomy between, on the one hand, literary studies and creative writing and, on the other hand, theory and practice might just be a red herring—and I would not be the first person to point this out, endemic as it is to the rise of the discipline (O'Rourke 2005, Dawson 2005, Wandor 2008, Harper 2010). It is, however, this very false dichotomy that I wish to explore here, because 'in education ... evidence of critical understanding is as important as a demonstration of creative capacity (Pope 2006, 130). This false dichotomy, I believe, is inherent in the tension between intellectual and emotional elements in our aesthetic response to texts. As writers, we are first and foremost readers and therefore can learn from our reading processes. If we want to conceptualise the writing process with all the conflicting factors this entails—factors which play not only on our intellect but also on our emotions—we might find it useful to combine the rigorously objective methods of Iser's aesthetic response (Iser 1980), with psychoanalysis.

Our aesthetic response to writing is informed by both emotional and intellectual processes. The emotions described, depend on the communicative function of language: emotional attitudes instigated during the reading process are engendered by textual strategies, strategies that are not always identical with those that prestructure the intellectual processing of the text, yet are akin to it. This highlights the enduring false dichotomy between on the one hand creative writing and criticism and on the other hand theory and practice in literary studies, a dichotomy which may just be a re-staging of the 'two culture debates' which divided the sciences from literature one century ago (Wandor 2008, 64).

Literary critics have always known that feelings influence our reception of art. Aristotle immediately springs to mind. He saw the function of tragedy as to arouse pity and terror, thus inducing a cleansing release of those emotions, which he felt to be disturbing (Stanford 1984). Aristotle's *Poetics*, of course, in fact a critique of the Platonic indictment of drama for stirring up passions in an unseemly way, since in Aristotle's view the audience's subjective participation in fictional events had—at least potentially—a positive value.

However, the effect of literature cannot be founded on a single principle. Aristotle's theory of catharsis is not comprehensive. It does not account for the fact that many texts have, for example, a frustrating or stimulating effect; our intellectual interaction with the text plays a crucial role too, one that must not be overlooked. Aristotle reduces the broad spectrum of possible responses to art to catharsis. Thus, his theory cannot provide a convincing explanation of the complex fascination that proceeds from reading literature. For this fascination arises from the fact that the rational and the irrational both participate in the reception process, that they often come into conflict and that tensions may arise. Consequently, erratic and unpredictable responses can occur.

The New Critics were aware of the tensions between intellect and emotion. They even went so far as to claim that certain cognitive processes are instigated by emotions. For

example, the authors of ‘The Affective Fallacy’ postulate that: ‘Emotion ... has a well-known capacity ... to inflame cognition, and to grow upon itself in surprising proportions to gains of reason (Wimsatt & Monroe 1972, 349). The emphasis laid on the subjective dimensions of the cognitive process in the writings of the New Critics is significant inasmuch as they drew up the manifesto of axioms to which all the divergent trends in literary theory have been reacting to this day (Ayers 2008).

Although the New Critics recognised the importance of the tensions between the rational and the irrational, and there was even a place for non-verbally communicated knowledge in their concept of literature, they were unable to make statements about this phenomenon. They had no theory whereby non-linguistic phenomena could be conceptualised. They did not discuss, draw upon or assimilate theories like phenomenology or psychoanalysis. Therefore, the New Critics had to limit themselves to intrinsic textual analyses on the one hand, and devastating polemics on the other. They constantly spoke out against the use of psychological terms in discussing the reading processes. René Wellek and Austin Warren, in their *Theory of Literature*, tell us:

The psychology of the reader ... will always remain outside the object of literary study—the concrete work of art ... Psychological theories must be theories of effect and may lead in extreme cases to such criteria of the value of poetry as that proposed by A.E. Housman, ... [who] tells us, one hopes with his tongue in his cheek, that good poetry can be recognized by the thrill down our spine. This is on the same level as eighteenth-century theories which measured the quality of a tragedy by the amount of tears shed by the audience or the movie scout’s conception of the quality of a comedy on the basis of the number of laughs he has counted in the audience. Thus anarchy, scepticism, a complete confusion of values is the result of every psychological theory, as it must be unrelated either to the structure or the quality of a poem. (Wellek and Warren 1956, 147)

According to Wellek and Warren, even the slightest deviation from the assumptions of the New Criticism would necessarily end in anarchy.

Northrop Frye, an immediate successor of the New Critics, rightly criticises them for their inarticulateness: ‘Here criticism is restricted to ritual Masonic gestures, to raised eyebrows and cryptic comments and other signs of an understanding too occult for syntax’ (Frye 1957, 4). Frye pleads for a democratisation of literature. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, he attempts to initiate this democratisation by proposing a strict system of classification into which all literary and critical phenomena are to be integrated. But even Frye perpetuates one of the New Critics’ misconceptions in viewing the mode of existence of the literary work as wholly self-enclosed and inaccessible to language: ‘Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb’ (Frye 1957, 4). Consequently, Frye postulates two different kinds of processing reality, one *verbal* and one *pre-verbal*: ‘Criticism ... is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human productive power which itself does not speak’ (Frye 1957, 12). This human productive power consists, for Frye, in what C.G. Jung describes as the ‘collective unconscious’, i.e., a reservoir of symbols and archetypes which is timeless and accessible to all mankind. Frye bases his comprehensive system

of literary typology on Jung's psychology. However, that does not make the pre-verbal area in which he situates literature any less cryptic, since Jung's terms and concepts rest on inadequate foundations too.

Even though Frye distances himself from Jung (Frye 1957, 111f), his theory is based on Jung's concept of a collective unconscious, and thus proves unsatisfactory for mapping out both the pre-verbal area which supplies creative energies and the reading process. According to Frye, both author and reader receive impulses from a collective unconscious, impulses that will be the more effective the less they are influenced by the content of the individual unconscious concerned. Frye's model of the individual unconscious is that of a filter: as soon as too much sediment settles on it, it will inevitably muddy the clear, pure current of symbols emerging from the collective unconscious. According to this model of unconscious processes, emotions have the status of smudges. Affects, incidentally, do not even exist.

The manifestos of the New Critics and their successors prove as inadequate as Aristotle's theory of catharsis to describe the role of emotions in reading, let alone writing. Despite Wellek and Warren's fervent dictum that any attempt to construct a theory of *effect* will necessarily end in anarchy, one of the aims of this paper is just that: I want to account for both the rational and the subjective elements in reading so that as a writer I can understand what effects I may have on the reader and how this in turn might affect my own writing process. In sketching out my concepts, I draw on what Wellek and Warren call 'the structure of the poem', i.e., on the textual strategies, schemata and divergent perspectives contained in a literary text. I also use phenomenology and psychoanalysis, the very theories that the New Critics neglected to assimilate. I address the following questions: how can the actual process of reading texts be conceptualised? To what extent are the reader's responses pre-structured by what she is reading? Are her reactions to reading contained in the text?

Describing the various reader constructs is a possible first step towards mapping out this rather complex area. It comprises the contemporary reader (Hans Robert Jauss 1982), the ideal reader (Jonathan Culler 1982), the super-reader (Michael Riffaterre 1971), the informed reader (Stanley Fish 1980), the intended reader (Erwin Wolff 1971), the empirical reader (Norman Holland 1975) and many more (Iser 1980, 27-38). In comparing the philosophical assumptions that guide these heuristic constructs, it soon becomes clear that decisions about the ultimate cognitive aim of the theory in question lurk within all the different models.

Thus, for example, the contemporary reader would seem to be that conglomerate of scientific, philosophical and literary knowledge which constitutes the horizon of expectations against which a text is read. With the help of this construct, a work's history of receptions can be conceived of as a sequence of differing interpretations conditioned by the connections between the changing horizons of expectations and the text concerned (Jauss 1982).

However, as soon as literature is regarded as a grammar-based system analogous to language—as in structuralism—an ideal reader is required, one whose comprehensive reading competence enables her to decode all the conventions and potentials of meaning in the text. The individual features of reader constructs are determined by

their respective philosophical foundations, as well as by the specific cognitive aims of the reader-response theory in question. The fact that emotions play an important part in our interaction with literature is scarcely *ever* reflected. Moreover, all the reader constructs presented so far are essentially deterministic: either the reader is dominated by the text (as in Culler's and Riffaterre's theories) or he has unlimited power over the text (as in Fish and Holland).

A way out of this dilemma is provided by Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader'. This is a concept that brings into view not any specific reader, but reading, the process upon which the dynamic interaction between reader and text relies. For Iser, meaning is neither pre-given nor arbitrary, but is constituted only in the *act of reading*. One of his basic notions is that a text has two poles, one artistic (created by the author) and the other aesthetic (the 'concretization' accomplished by the reader). Both poles interact with each other (Iser 1980, 21). In his model of the reading process, Iser draws on phenomenology, particularly on Roman Ingarden's theories (Ingarden 1973, 276ff) to sketch out the text's mode of existence, on hermeneutics to conceptualise the way in which the literary strategies contained in the text are decoded, and on Gestalt psychology to outline the interactions between text and reader. According to Ingarden, a literary work consists of several layers, each comprising a sequence of schemata, positions, perspectives and strategies. His concept of literature is informed by the notion that the noblest task of art lies in the symbolic representation of some inorganic whole. The role that Ingarden therefore assigns to the 'schematized aspects' in his model is that of chiming in 'polyphonic harmony' (Ingarden 1973, 276ff). The concept of polyphonic harmony, in turn, serves him as criterion for distinguishing between true and false concretisations: the reader has to process the separate strata in a way that makes them merge. A lively interaction between text and reader is thus hardly possible, and reading remains an activity which is to a large extent dominated by the text.

The 'implied reader' is a concept which embraces both the formal structures contained in the text and the reader's acts of concretisation. The reader's responses are written into the text and the aesthetic effect of a text therefore results from a decoding of its many layers, each layer having a double aspect: they are verbal structures on the one hand, and on the other the very conditions which allow the text to be affectively and mentally activated (Iser 1980, 21). The idea of a 'correct' concretisation—such as Ingarden (and later Culler and Riffaterre) have in mind as an ideal is not present in Iser, but the idea of an adequate one is: Iser by no means leaves the act of consistency-building entirely open (as do Fish and Holland), but conceives of the interaction between text and reader as a process which—within a range of possible variations—describes certain patterns and movements.

If we classify the various reader-response theories according to whether they not only acknowledge but also conceptualise the tensions between the emotional and the intellectual elements contained in the reading process, they fall into two groups. On the one hand, we have critics like Holland, who entirely deny that there are intellectual components involved in reading. The individual reader's personality profile is of greater interest to these critics than questions relevant to the study of literature, such as analyses of a text's formal structure, or of the function of emotions

stimulated by reading literature. The methods applied by Holland are just as subjective as the ultimate aim of his studies; they do not stand up to close examination. On the other hand, there are the works of Iser and Jauss, which limit themselves mainly to analysing our intellectual interaction with literary texts. Neither the theory of aesthetic response as developed by Iser, nor Jauss's reception theory, can be accused of moving too far away from the text as the proper object of literary criticism, or of employing subjective methods. However, Iser and Jauss are almost exclusively interested in the cognitive processing of a work of art, the fact that emotions play an important part in our interaction with literature is scarcely ever reflected in their work. Thus, Culler's polemic attack against reader-response criticism is—to a certain degree—justified: 'The experiences or responses that modern reader-oriented critics invoke are generally cognitive rather than affective: not feeling shivers along the spine, weeping in sympathy, or being transported with awe, but having one's expectations proved false, struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity, or questioning the assumptions on which one had relied (Culler 1983, 39) 'Shivers along the spine' are difficult to conceptualise with the methods developed by the theory of aesthetic response or by reception theory.

Characteristic of the reading processes contained in all texts, are the tensions between intellectual and emotional elements. These tensions are mirrored in the two opposite camps within reader-response criticism: theorising is exclusively about subjective factors and conducted with subjective methods on one side, and about intellectual factors and conducted with rigorous objectivity on the other. As a result, problems and tensions arise within academia, which are staged in attacks on the philosophical bases of the positions in question. These tensions derive from the subject matter, from the specific nature of the reading process, which consists in ever-changing relations between various modes of perception. Obviously, the structured field of dynamic interactions between the two cannot be analysed with the methods of reader-oriented literary criticism alone.

Subjectivity, including emotions and affects, however, should by no means be equated with irrationality. Subjectivity can perfectly well be understood by rigorous and objectifiable methods. Psychoanalysis has provided us with objective descriptions of seemingly erratic subjective events. In Freud's writings, the categories of the rational and the irrational, the intellectual and the affective, are subjected to a fundamental reassessment, for in all manifestations of the unconscious it is the apparently irrational that is the most significant.

Our conscious and unconscious reactions are always discontinuous; they lack coherence. The unconscious, though containing material which is repressed by the conscious mind, cannot be simply equated with what is repressed. The unconscious is not an objective entity, but a battlefield of tensions, of opposing and conflicting drives, which can be perceived only through their effects, namely through dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, repetitive and compulsive actions, symptoms, etc). These effects form patterns which allow certain conclusions to be drawn about the very nature of the conflicts on which they are based. Psychoanalytic methods permit a conceptualisation of the radical break between the conscious and the unconscious. In order to do so, however, one must also look at the hinge between the conscious and

the unconscious, i.e., affects. Psychoanalysis thus opens up the opportunity to elaborate on the seemingly erratic and apparently irrational elements contained in the reading process and, subsequently into the critical and creative processes.

For psychoanalysis, the act of writing always presupposes a loss, of which the text becomes the transmutation into a fictitious positivity. For Freud, this loss refers to the primary object, i.e., the mother. As Lacan has shown in his later work, however, writing may also fulfil the function of *suppléance*, a kind of stand in that helps the self cohere, thereby preventing subjective dissolution (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]). For Lacan, then, the loss may also refer to the ego itself. Either way, we are in uncanny territory. This uncanny territory is home to ‘the only affect that does not lie’: anxiety (Lacan 2004 [1962-63], 23). Thus it would be fair to say that we all write out of the need to negotiate anxiety. But we seem to do this in different ways.

By way of conclusion I wish to suggest that combining the lessons of reader response criticism and psychoanalysis may help us articulate our own writing processes, thus disproving that ‘Criticism can talk, and [that] all the arts are dumb’ (Frye 1957, 4).

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