Literary Theory as Socio-Historical Convention and Cultural Transfer in the Classroom: A Review

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In this article we examine the implications of literary theory in the light of social patterns which themselves define the parameters of culture in the classroom. If there are indeed social forces at work in our schools, literature is a means of giving expression to them and, as such, provides a frame of reference for the transfer of culture. With this in mind, the question of how theory establishes a frame of reference for guiding action or explaining social events is of primary concern. In relation to this question, the issue of how literature provides a vehicle for transferring culture assumes importance. Our argument rests on the view that history is nothing more than the sum total of culturally-determined events recorded at a particular point in time and disseminated to the world at large through literature. Does this mean that literary theory may be used to predict cultural transference in the classroom? We review the limitations of this question and conclude with a discussion of some empirical implications for research.

Dans cet article, nous examinons ce que pourraient être les implications d'une théorie de la littérature à la lumière des modèles cociaux qui sont les définisseurs des paramêtres culturels dans la salle de classe. S'il y a en effet des forces sociales à l'oeuvre dans nos écoles, la littérature est alors un moyen de les activer et de leur procurer ainsi un cadre de référence pour le transfer culturel. C'est précisément pour cela qu'il devient important de se demander comment une théorie peut vraisemblablement établier un cadre de référence en vue de guider une action ou d'expliquer des événements sociaux. Dans la même perspective, la question de savoir comment la littérature peut être utilisée comme un instrument de transfer culturel est essentielle. Nous basons notre argumentation sur le fait que l'histoire n'est rien de plus que la somme des événements culturellement déterminés qui ont été enregistrés à un moment particulier et qui sont répandus mondialement par le biais de la littérature. Cela signifie t-il qu'une théorie de la littérature peut être utilisée pour prédire le transfer culturel dans la salle de classe? Nous analysons les limites de cette question et concluons par une discussion des implications pour d'autres recherches.

Literary Theory: The Poststructuralist Imperative

When we examine theory we find a consensus that poststructuralism is in ascendancy. This has some justification, especially if it is considered purely in terms of what 20th century literary critics have handed down to us. Walzer (1988) makes the interesting point that criticism is a self-conscious activity; therefore, it is difficult to judge society other than as a product of self-enlightenment (p. 4). It is as though the practice of social criticism is undertaken by specialists who look at the world through a filtering of their inner selves, that the consciousness of their own being is an imperative dictating all forms of reality. Of course, the poststructuralists would say that any view of society must be constituted by the beliefs and values of individuals beyond institutional or organizational ideologies and arrangements. This is almost like saying that poststructuralism cannot be sustained without recourse to a personalized view of society, a view which carries with it the danger that the literary theorist could well become detached and alienated from existing convention. Yet, for poststructuralism it is the personalization of literary theory which gives it its power, which provides the source of its independence and a capacity to attempt to "mirror" modern society recreated by individuals through self-discovery.

In trying to place literary theory in the role of arbitrator in which personalized, independent judgements are made on the basis of how they might best fit society, there is difficulty in coming to grips with poststructuralism as a perspective which itself is a deterministic point of view. Mellor and Patterson (in press) touch upon this when they say that what constitutes a "natural" process in reading may not also be "neutral" in the sense that "individual objectivity" or "personal experience" come from reaction to existing discourse learned from social practice. We locate our conceptualization of text from a positional stance (e.g., poststrucutualism and feminism), more often than not pursued in order to uphold a power base rather than as a value-free response. What then becomes important is the question of whether or not there ever can be a value-free response in the application of literary theory to any understanding of culture, history, or society.

For his part, Bergonzi (1990) comes to the conclusion that authors of modern English studies sought a consensus encompassing the study of literature within cultural values (p. 181). As such, there are also wholly predetermined political views to the Left, Right, and Center under which the study of literature is subsumed. Bergonzi goes on to say that there is a good case for resisting the takeover of literature by culture; however, what we are left with is not so much theory as guidance but an explosive force which might detonate in any direction at any uncontrolled moment. What Bergonzi is saying poses a dilemma. Poststructuralism derives its inherent direction from cultural and political determinism. Even so, the acts of individuals are not wholly value-free and poststructuralism, in this sense, is not presuppositionless, since it is endowed

with historical and social artifact derived from cultural contextualization. The dilemma is therefore one in which literature gains expression as much through the free association of ideas as through the representation of consensus views which are culturally determined. Literary theory achieves powers of description, explanation, and prediction precisely because of this consensus.

Implications of Value-Free Literary Theory

Alternatively, there is an argument for saying that many of the dominant banners under which literary theory has emerged in the western world — terms like *structural-functionalism*, *postmodernism*, and *poststructuralism* are aspects of culture and society from which literature remains separate. Indeed, the language which contemporary Australian historians such as Manning Clark, Donald Horne, and Robert Hughes have used to depict society and history reads as though each has an individual's view — in Hughes's case, a fairly rugged individualism — totally without circumspection relating to sociological bandwagons. They are their own masters, largely made so by the independence of language. That is, it is difficult to see how theory in literature is an outcome of the language used in socio-historical reconstruction, as language itself reflects individual authorship rather than adherence to social or cultural convention. Margolies (1969) for example, suggests that the function of theory is to provide a guide to action but that many novelists and poets only pay lip service to this notion of theory, believing, instead, that the immediate function of literature is to represent the individuality of authorship (p. 110). Similarly, McGuik (1989), discussing the Latin American poet Mallarme, feels that we *misread* literature precisely because of our attempts to place particular texts within the framework of *modernity*, *structuralism*, or *humanism*. What is important, says McGuik, is intertextuality and the influence a writer gains as an aestheticist, commentator, or historian (pp. 167-169).

While saying that literature is independent of the typologies of theory because of the dominant influence of intertextuality, it is also possible to say that the way text becomes value-laden is important. The concept of *intertextuality* is interesting and not easy to define. Yet it is a vital point, suggesting that literary theory is a function of writing and reading rather an outcome of socio-historical convention. It could also be said that this does not place contemporary literary theory wholly under the umbrella of poststructuralism, as this term presupposes qualities about the nature of literature which do not necessarily apply to the independence of authorship.

In a masterful survey of theory and the study of literature, Sorensen (1987) reviewed the positivist origins of structuralism and then examined literature and literary theories against the background of Comtean rationalism, Popperian induction, and the philosophy of science more generally. Sorensen refers particularly to the work of Greimas (1966) and Lotman (1971) who propose the

notion of intertextuality to be more clearly defined and analyzed in terms of what Sorensen (1987) calls "objectified content of thought" (p. 61). The philological processes in literature are sometimes more complex than the meaning text conveys. There is a distinction between "thoughts on one hand and inscriptions on the other" (p. 162). The question then becomes whether we see text as a series of conceptions or as the object of empiricism. This is exactly the problem: Text constitutes the heart and mind of authors; yet in its written form, it exists as an object open to theorizing. While it may be reasonable to say that theory encompasses anything in the natural and social worlds, including the hearts and minds of people, it is difficult to see how literary theory, poststructuralist or not, can provide a guide to action. Nor can it be easily tethered and deployed to describe human behavior in predictable terms when its essence lies in the hearts and minds of individuals acting spontaneously and independently.

Sorensen goes on to delve into this. He looks at Karl Popper's classic distinction between subjective and objective knowledge, which Sorensen, in turn, compares to Mukarovsky's (1977) comparison between "artifact" and "aesthetic" object. The first is the "materially given symbol of meaning" and the "aesthetic object is the meaning correlate of the artefact in the collective consciousness of the reader" (p. 163). This distinction opens wide-ranging possibilities, especially in the area which Popper (1959, 1963) describes as the objectified content of thought. In passing, it is perhaps sufficient here to reconfirm suspicions about the importance of intertextuality lying somewhere between subjective meaning and objective understanding. There will always be a concern in the minds of some that theory must lie squarely within textuality rather than socio-historical convention. For example, in teaching English studies, a number of authors (for example, Gilbert, 1990; Burgess, 1988; and O'Neill, 1987) point to this interesting concept of the internalization of meaning occurring as a result of reader-response to text, referring to it as a sort of anarchy in literature. There is anarchy in the sense in which symbol dominates, where imagery demands interpretation through the internalization of experience. Literary theory provides not so much a guide to action as a means by which we gain meaning directly from the text itself.

More generally, Giroux (1989) has made an impressive plea for seeing postmodernism and poststructuralism not so much in terms of emerging literary studies, feminist studies, and cultural studies as the emergence instead of a radical pedagogy capable of changing political and social order from the school classroom (pp. 128-134). The implication is that literary theory may assume a right-wing or left-wing orientation, a positioning which it is not possible to be sure has really occurred as far as *literature* itself is concerned. Green's (1990) argument that "literature" is "anti-essentialist" is a similar point of view in which literature, of itself, has no *intrinsic* qualities but is a re-creation of history, not made but given (p. 139). This stance does more for the place of literature in

teaching English than it does for literature itself. The orientation of literature as a teaching subject, in which *what is taught* determines *what literature becomes*, is a somewhat sad outcome of the failure of literary theory to provide guidance to metaphor and imagery, as distinct from theory as guidance for using literature in education and cultural transfer. Literary conventions themselves become part of education, an area where much effort is currently being directed. Along with Green, recent work in Australia by Mellor and Patterson (in press), Corcoran (in press), Green and Reid (1989), Buckingham (1990), Curtis (1990), Belsey (1982), Mellor, O'Neill, and Patterson (in press), and Reid (1987) all respectively make the point that English teaching is concerned with cultural transfer in one form or another. If socio-cultural parameters determine the way that literature becomes an "artefact" as distinct from "aesthetic object" (to recall Mukarovsky's (1977) concept), then what we teach is perhaps more an aspect of sociology than of literature. Eagleton (1983) in his first chapter on "The Rise of English" has some very clear-minded things to say on the origins of this. "At the centre of aesthetic theory at the turn of this century," says Eagleton, "is the semi-mystical doctrine of the symbol. For Romanticism, indeed, the symbol becomes the panacea for all problems" (p. 21). Eagleton goes on to say that aestheticism caused a loss of contact with the hard realities of common life, that conflicts developed between the subjective and objective, between the material and spiritual. Of course, early 18th century Romanticism gave way to Victorian utilitarianism in which literature became very much a product of class and society, a product handed down through education to today's generation.

The point here is that there really is a difference between literature as ideology and literature as English, the former being concerned with practices for teaching and cultural transfer and the latter with symbol, myth, and the individuality of authorship. It is possible to see literary theory as confused in its orientation between the two, often purporting to explain and describe the untrammelled independence of authorship while becoming distracted by the role of literature in socio-historical convention. Perhaps Gilbert (1989) gets close to this line of argument when she quotes Moffett's (1981) analysis of "full-fledged authoring." Moffett describes the authentic expression of an individual's own ideas as follows: "True authoring occurs naturally to the extent that the writer is composing with raw material, that is, source content not previously abstracted and formulated by others" (Moffett, 1981, p. 89).

Likewise, Lee and Green put it this way:

> What counts as an appropriate response is more often than not a somewhat mystifying blend of personal sincerity and public plausibility and relevance, leading often to difficulties and differences at the point of assessment. This is not to say, of course, that reader-response pedagogy is not an important advance on earlier "heritage transmission" models of literary education; individual student-readers certainly needed rescuing from the cultural silence to which they were all too often relegated, when reproduction of the "correct" meaning of a literary text was all that mattered. (1987, p. 5)

This two-sidedness in reader-response is part of the literary theory problem itself and leads inexorably to the question: What is literariness? Lee and Green seem to be inferring that there is really no "official" version, that literature is genre in which readers sort out their own meaning. Rosmarin (1985) defines genre in precisely these terms ("all thinking is sorting," p. 23) while Di Girolamo (1981) sees literariness as a collection of various genres (p. 82). Di Girolamo goes on to pose the question: Does literature exist at all? Is literature an entirely superfluous concept? This is an ambiguous suggestion. Perhaps what Di Girolamo is saying here is that, because literature may be seen to perform a purely rhetorical role subsumed somehow by the pragmatism of cultural transference, it loses its own identity. It is possible to see this point of view. A more attractive line of argument is to agree instead with Lowenthal (1961) when he says that literature may be a commodity of popular culture, but true artistic endeavor relies on the primacy of imagery and creativity in which literature is a "means of rounding out our understanding of social norms and values" (xvi).

Literary Theory and Empirical Investigation of Reading Problems

The point has emerged from an examination of the nature of theory that theory does not satisfactorily explain the ways in which literature has been used either as cultural transference or as authorship. In each there is no other objective than to create a form of genre within language. Part of the problem lies in trying to pin a tag (such as poststructuralism or modernism) to a process which is inherently free. What makes literature free is the way that authorship itself is free — untrammelled by socio-historical convention or by the need to use literature as a necessary medium of education.

What we are left with, then, is a somewhat uncertain determination of what literary theory actually is. Certainly, it is not clear how literary theory may be used to guide or explain generalization in the socio-historical applications of literature. Also, if we say that literary theory may guide research into reader-response in the classroom, we wonder what empirically verifiable outcomes are likely to emerge. For in the end, authorship is all about individuality rather than generalization; in order to offer explanation and guidance, theory, of necessity, will remain in the domain of g-factor universalities.

Against this background, Lee and Green's (1987) expression of "heritage transmission" is not a bad way of stating the dilemma arising from this "two-sidedness" of reader-response. The dilemma in undertaking research lies with literature as social convention on the one hand and literature as personal response to authorship on the other. In coming to grips with this dilemma, Mellor et al. (in press) point out that there has been a fairly wide range of pedagogical practices in the teaching of literature; these have become dominated by heritage models as well as by skills and communication models. Each in their own way has been used as an instrument of research; however, the current

paradigmatic status of literary theory probably tends towards an amalgam of personal growth pedagogy and reader response theory (Mellor et al., in press). The growth model might best be described as contrasting to the heritage model in the sense that the aim is to encourage students to read widely and enjoy literature as they study text that is not referenced to socio-historical or cultural convention. In this sense, literature provides a point of reference only to the experience of the readers' own lives and, as education, has value precisely because individuals respond to text, not to a pre-existing set of conventions or culturally-determined criteria.

As mentioned earlier, this formlessness is worrying. While seeing the value of personal experience in reader-response, the inability of literary theory to provide generalization within the scope of immensely divergent possible readings makes predictive analysis in reading-response virtually impossible. There needs to be a point of reference, a first assumption, underpinning the logicality of human action and experience from which we create meaning. For their part, Mellor et al. (in press) put it this way: "What is unlikely to occur in growth model practices, is an analysis of the construction of divergent readings, the values they support or affirm and the grounds on which any particular reading might be defended."

In other words, we are left with our dilemma: A growth model allows divergent readings to occur, whereas the heritage model does not. Divergent readings tend to be left suspended, unconnected by universalities which may be empirically verified, but without thought as to their possible origins or first assumptions. Poststructuralists have broadly drawn attention to the ways in which readings have been constructed in order to question *why* the reader extracts a particular reading, including comprehension of how existing enculturation and learned discourses have influenced readings. The essence of poststructuralism, then, becomes analysis of what the reading actually supports in terms of values being exposed. And this, for the moment, is the best we can hope for.

Against this background of dichotomous inference between objective and subjective meaning, between functionalism and poststructuralism, between heritage models of acquired learning and growth models of self-discovery, it is important to place empiricism in the general scheme of things — ultimately to try to come to terms with how teachers might use literary theory in the classroom, especially in the teaching of English.

One of the common ways of teaching English is to interrupt a single or dominant reading of a text (i.e., to encourage students to see that the readings they produce are in fact emerging from a set of opinions or values which emanate from specific societal groups or structures). The implication is that, in order for students to read a text totally free of preconceived notions or beliefs,

they must first be trained: in other words, English as *education* (the heritage model) rather than English as *literature* (the growth model).

The potential research problem here is essentially one in which, as a race of humans, we are immersed from birth in values which have been established. For example, it has become an accepted norm to believe that all fathers go out to work and that mothers remain at home filling their days by cleaning, washing, and so on. As a consequence of this, we have children's texts portraying just these attitudes with the result that a dominant gender reading becomes inevitable. What is interesting is that a dominant reading may occur despite the text itself inferring meaning from a variety of words which allow scope for divergent interpretation. This is to say that meanings are not produced from *within* a text, but rather that the readings are drawn from an enculturation process. Dominant readings have been particularly induced in the lower primary grades with the advent and continuing use of reading schemes which portray singular "readings" of societal values. As a research problem, the teacher who seeks to disrupt this dominant reading assesses children's reading responses as heritage enculturation against the possibilities posed by a growth model of pre-suppositionless self-discovery. One of the vital points about heritage response is the implied passivity of the reader, almost as though enculturation has created a situation under which readers themselves are unable to contradict the absorption of conventional views. For the researcher, the ability to draw empirical conclusions from data inevitably acquired within the context of a readership itself influenced by convention-conformity to variables beyond the text poses a monumental task as far as research design and methodology goes.

On the other hand, as far as classroom teaching is concerned, the matter may be more simply resolved. More by instinct than anything else, teachers feel that the growth model seems to work. What they find happening is that, left to their own devices, children produce a range of reading-responses in which each child has his or her own thoughts about a specific text and then shares that reading with others — encultured or not. This has the potential to result in a variety of different readings. The difficulty then is to draw students' attention to the ways in which these readings, or meanings, have been produced and the manner in which, as readers, they respond to text. So the growth model tends to need an added stage whereby students analyze *how* they are reading, how they produced meaning and what it is that has enabled them to come to those conclusions. Questions which make the children think about any possible social conditioning which may have resulted in certain meanings being generated are important. It is *not* always personal experience. As Lee and Green (1987) noted, a reading may well become personal from an encultured understanding. It is from this personal basis of understanding that children develop the ability to assess critically the genre of text and ultimately to share this understanding intertextually by appreciating the qualities of authorship itself.

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