

Introduction

Since the eighteenth century literary reading has enjoyed an elevated reputation. In the English tradition the names of critics such as Johnstone, Coleridge, Arnold, or T. S. Eliot summon to mind a distinguished and influential range of arguments for literature's unique mimetic power, its ability to break the film of familiarity by which we view the world, or its importance for civilizing the mind of its readers. Such arguments no longer carry the conviction they once did. If we ask whether the modern literary theorist could point to any specific feature, process, or experience that would help distinguish literary from other kinds of reading, the standard answer is no. Although reader response theorists from I. A. Richards, through Wolfgang Iser, to Keith Opdahl have offered a range of proposals on this issue, the current consensus is that literariness is a social convention: the prevailing interpretive community—to borrow Stanley Fish's (1980) influential term—determines what counts as "literature." In the current postmodern view (if we can speak of such a fractured topic) the claims of literature to special status are subject to terminal suspicion. Yet many readers outside the academy who have never heard of Fish or his colleagues continue to value the experiences that literary reading offers and appear to find it distinctive. To cite one prominent example, on the Amazon website numerous readers' comments about novels they have read bear witness to the continued vigorous life of literature outside the classroom.

Yet literary studies seems to have abandoned its traditional post as the guardian and foster-parent of literature. A new genre of writing appeared in the last decade lamenting this phenomenon, bearing titles such as *Literature Lost* (John Ellis, 1997), and *The Rise and Fall of English* (Robert Scholes, 1998). In a recent review article Peter Berkowitz (2006) tells us that "The love of literature is endangered," in particular because "for more than three decades a large faction of professors of literature has contributed to extinguishing the flame." This seems unduly paranoid to me, as the Amazon example demonstrates. It is literary studies, rather, that may have written itself almost into oblivion, if the findings of a recent survey reported by Stephen Greenblatt (2003) are correct: when Americans were asked what image literary scholarship had in the public mind, the answer was a blank: the public gave no thought to it at all (see my more de-

tailed reference to this issue in Chapter 3). But, I hasten to add, this book is not another lament for the decline of literary studies—far from it; although in several places I will make my own complaints about the treatment of literary reading by contemporary theorists (mainly in the next chapter, which will serve to get it out of the way).

The point from which I launch the present book is the following observation. I find it odd that almost none of the theorists in the debate about the fate of literature have considered examining the experiences of actual readers; several have remarked that such experiences are too idiosyncratic to be worth considering. But is that really so? Here is where the empirical project, the study of real acts of reading, can provide some new perspectives on old issues. Is there such a quality as literariness? What does it mean to engage empathically with a character in a novel? Do sound structures in literary texts systematically influence readers? Does reading literature perform some function for us that no other experience can provide? These are just some of the issues taken up in this book, but taken up in the context of empirical study: that is, what evidence we can gather for the reality of our proposals about literary reading from the experience of actual readers. Rather than speculating about the effect of readings, as traditional reader response studies have done (from Ingarden to Opdahl), the research discussed in this book is motivated by a continual two-way interweaving of theoretical proposal and empirical investigation. In my view theoretical statements are ineffectual without empirical support; empirical study without theoretical motivation is trivial. Both are required in order to establish any durable, significant insights into the nature of literary reading. This approach, I would add, constitutes the empirical study represented here (my own studies and those of many of my colleagues in the field) as the first meaningful and coherent scientific study of the literary phenomenon. (I will not attempt here to rebut the postmodern argument that the scientific claim is necessarily just another fiction.) As the empirical method will be unfamiliar for most of my readers, a detailed introduction to it is provided in Chapter 3.

So what is distinctive about the present approach? And what does it tell us about literary reading that we didn't already know? I can indicate the scope of the book overall by a brief description of some of its major themes and their empirical implications. Not surprisingly, some of the themes will be familiar; yet, the empirical dimension provides a new twist on some old insights. In summary (very cursory), this is the story of reading we will be pursuing in various ways throughout the book.

I will be concerned above all with *ordinary* readers, not academic ones. Even though, in our experimental work, we sometimes obtained the participation of students of literature, the issues they considered were of the kind that all readers would be likely to find relevant and interesting (I refer briefly to expert readers and their possible differences in Chapter 7). Second, in proposing an overall

purpose or function for literary reading, I had in mind an evolutionary context, hinging on whether or not we can actually sustain a hypothesis for the adaptive value of literature. Thus the underlying concept for all the studies described in the book is that literature is *dehabituating*; that is, it invites us to consider frames for understanding and feeling about the world that are likely to be novel, or at least, unfamiliar. Thirdly, in contrast to the contemporary view that literary reading depends upon the acquisition of the appropriate conventions, the view I take here—while it does not dismiss the relevance of convention—asserts that through the reading process we can identify properties that are distinctive to *literariness*. This is not a modern version of the claim, fostered by the Russian Formalists, that literary texts can be objectively distinguished from other texts by a unique array of formal features (although we can identify some formal features that appear to be confined largely to literary texts); rather, literariness is manifested by the special nature of the interaction between reader and text.

Fourth, in accounting for the processes of literary reading my emphasis will fall in particular on the role of *feeling*. This will distinguish my approach from a recently developed school of literary scholars, that of cognitive poetics, which has been providing interesting accounts of how we read literary texts in the light of what is known about cognitive functions such as deixis, schemata and frames, figure and ground, theory of mind, and the like. While I find such readings plausible, I am surprised that a school that draws on an empirical science for its theory (cognition) has yet to see the need to carry out empirical study itself to help verify its proposals. More important, the restriction to a cognitive approach has almost entirely eliminated consideration of the role of feeling in literary response. The investigation of feeling, its roles, function, and consequences, is perhaps the key element in this book as a whole. Fifth, my approach emphasises *experiencing* literature rather than interpreting it. Given the attention to ordinary readers, it is clear that most readers most of the time are interested in the significance of the literature they read, not how to interpret it. Interpretation is the besetting preoccupation of literary scholars. The attention to experience also provides specifically for an empirical approach, since it prompts us to ask what experiences of literary reading actual readers have, and to what extent these are distinctively literary. As Tompkins (1980) pointed out some time ago, in criticism prior to the New Critics “the specification of meaning is not a central concern” (p. 201). The classical critics were concerned with effect, with the power of a text, not with its meaning (p. 203). Interpretation only becomes central with the advent of formalist criticism (p. 222). To focus on experience, therefore, is to move decisively beyond the formalism of the New Critics in a way that, as Tompkins observed, poststructural approaches were rarely able to do.

Lastly, the various theories about response canvassed and tested in the book can be related, as I suggested, to one master theory, that of the *evolutionary*

implications of literature: I ask whether we can consider literary reading and its oral predecessors as adaptive, and, if so, whether, as some critics have claimed, literary response is shaped by some specific universals; that is, since literary culture is manifest in every human culture we know, do certain core features of it appear across literary cultures independently of outside influence (e.g., Hogan, 1997, 2003). Although few scholars have, as yet, made inroads on developing an evolutionary approach (e.g., Boyd, Carroll, Storey, Hogan), it is my judgement that the success of evolutionary theory in general in accounting for human development requires us to consider seriously how the evolutionary context will help us account for literary experience. Literary scholarship is in danger, otherwise, of receding into a quaint backwater, of little account to the readership still flourishing in the rest of the world that continues to generate insights about the self and our environment through the power of the literary text.

These six themes, then, motivate the discussions on offer throughout the book. The chapters are organized on somewhat varied lines, as might be expected of a book made up, as this one is, mainly of previously published articles written over several years. As might also be expected there is a good deal of interweaving of themes and topics, which means that readers will find themselves revisiting some topics several times when reading through the whole book. I have, nevertheless, revised some chapters to eliminate unnecessary redundancies; and I have also included some new material to bring certain chapters up to date, as well as providing two hitherto unpublished chapters (this one and Chapter 6 on feeling), in addition to another on neuropsychology that so far has been published only in Danish (Chapter 9). Individually the chapters represent a range of issues, whether primarily theoretical or empirical, or a balance of the two. However, the chapters in Part I are designed to provide a survey of the empirical issues and methods that I have found important in my work; the reader unfamiliar with empirical method might wish to start here by reading in particular Chapters 3 and 7, which provide an introduction to the field from my perspective. Part II broaches several other contexts for studying literary reading empirically, but ones that involve more speculative issues.

In the first main chapter, "On the Necessity of Empirical Studies of Literary Reading," I begin by arguing against the idea that the nature of literature must be decided by literary theorists, since this both gives rein to individual scholarly inventiveness (literature can be anything I say it is), and disregards the experiences of actual readers. I point to several postmodern conceptions that are held *a priori* by some empirical researchers, then advocate an empirical approach to such questions. I point to three issues in particular that merit empirical study: the role and place of the canon (where I cite historical evidence provided by Jonathan Rose, 1992) and the self-renewing power of canonical works; debilitation, which enables us to perceive and feel the world with fresh eyes, and which can be exemplified in studies by Russell Hunt and Doug

Vipond (1986) of "evaluations" in narratives, or the studies of Will van Peer (1986) or our own of foregrounding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994a); and decentering, apparent in the power of empathy which invites us to adopt different identities as we read, and which seems to involve greater personal implication in literary than in non-literary texts.

In the next chapter, "Experimental Approaches to Readers' Responses to Literature," I question the emphasis given to interpreting literary texts, and suggest that most ordinary readers pick up a literary text in order to gain the experience it offers, not to determine its meaning as a literary critic would. The main body of the chapter is devoted to outlining experimental design and methods, including a caution against the manipulation of literary texts for experimental purposes (as is frequently done). I describe several alternative research designs, involving study of intrinsic features of texts, or conditions which influence reading, and show how these bear on the issue of literariness. I go on to raise some questions about the design of empirical studies, including the need to remain open to the possible distinctiveness of literary texts.

In Chapter 4, "Interpretation, Cognition, Feeling," I consider in some detail the problem of interpretation, and appeal to the evidence of one of Henry James's short stories. In "The Figure in the Carpet" the search for a specific "figure" embedded in the literary text is shown to be an illusion. Yet, as I go on to point out, the approach of cognitive poetics, which its proponents have hailed as a new literary discipline, continues to analyse texts in the service of interpretation, as well as overlooking the role of feeling; and despite specifying cognitive processes of reading in exemplary detail, no attempt is made to check such proposals empirically with real readers.

In the opening sections of Chapter 5, "Feeling in the Comprehension of Literary Narratives," I return to the problem of cognition. As another way of debating the issue, I point to the achievements of schema theory as an approach to reading, but show its limitations in accounting for literary meaning. Literary texts often contain a good deal of indeterminacy, which creates a problem for the schema theorist attempting to categorize textual elements. I introduce some of the roles that I hypothesize are played by feeling: its cross-domain, anticipatory, and self-referential functions, and illustrate these with analysis of a short story by Virginia Woolf. This is followed by an account of an empirical study designed to contrast a schema-based understanding with one based on feeling: I show how readers of the Woolf story shifted from the first to the second, leading to a feeling-driven reevaluation of several aspects of the story, as signalled both by readers' ratings of story elements and their comments after reading. The study indicates the prevailing role played by the readers' feelings from the beginning of their response, a feature of response that I refer to as "feeling controls." I argue that literary reading involves not only schema instantiation but, more distinctively, schema creation.