Can the Question ‘Does Literature Exist?’ Persist?


An agnostic, departing from his ride among hedgerows, stands in a country church, expecting something. What is the form of this expectation? Lacking an intentional object, in what is the beholder’s attention invested?

It is a reverence without content; a disposition to delight with nothing, at the reverential moment, to delight in.

At the back of Philip Larkin’s awkward silence in ‘Church Going’ (discussed in ‘Does Literature Exist?’), two groups offer contrary catechisms in response to parallel questions: May God be presumed? Can literature be objectified? One group replies: No. Or only insofar as we contrive him, her, them, or it. The other replies: To be sure. And it is our duty to describe it (or them). In literary critical terms, the first point of view is with different degrees of warmth embraced by cultural relativists and conventionalists, the second by canonicists who often find more common ground than the first group, except an agreement about which texts should comprise the canon and which should be discarded. On the conventionalist side we may set – for example – Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish and Michel Foucault; and on the other – for example – E. D. Hirsch, Harold Bloom, Denis Donoghue and John Ellis. But there are substitutes aplenty for either group, and the game can continue well past the point when all reason for it is exhausted.

The title question of the previous piece – ‘Does Literature Exist?’ is, as Richard Deeming sees, false, but not idle, since this polarisation continues to preoccupy interpretative systems in which it is not even mentioned. It is not so much the elephant in the room making it difficult to see out of the window with which we have to deal, but – to revert to the Larkin primal moment – effluvia of elephant buried beneath the chancel making it difficult to breathe the incense.

The point of the polemic in the previous article was to begin to outline an idea of reader response which seems to me, potentially, to cut across a strangely fundamentalist, oddly persistent, subjective-objective distinction which underwrites much discussion about literature.

But what’s new about using an expectation as a way of keeping the subjective element without either insisting on a hard-and-fast objectivity, or abandoning objectivity altogether? How does this description differ from previous attempts to typify the difference, if any, between a reader’s version of the book and the book as artifact?

In brief: it is unlike Wolfgang Iser’s theory (more accurately, theories) of reader response because it presumes no independently existing text with which the reader’s attention joins in the act of realisation. It is unlike Stanley Fish’s theory because the work of literature is not designated at the moment the reader takes the text into him or herself as a bundle of specifiable features. It is, instead, an expectation that certain qualities in the reader shall be enhanced, if the text, in that reader’s experience of it,
proves sufficient to complete them. In this ‘reverential’ model of reader response, literature is a state of readiness for the completion of certain universal qualities, rather than, as it is in Fish, knowledge realised in the instant of inclusion. In it, subjective state and the text it defers to remain distinct, after the latter is realised in and as the former. In Fish, as I read him, they are collapsed into a singularity at the moment of comprehension.

It is unlike Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of reading, or Hans-Robert Jauss’s, because there is in it neither the requirement nor the possibility that a ‘horizon of expectations’ should be realised prior to the text being placed within or laid out along such a horizon. Both Jauss and Gadamer require that an (imaginary, in my view) objectivity be established before literature may ‘bulk true’ within such horizons. Literature, for them both, comes alive within parameters which lend it historic substance, somewhat as a battlefield, visited centuries later, locates the movements of those armies which previously moved across it.

In the model proposed here, since literature subsists in a series of expectations which lie in the individual, it is a subjective matter. There are no horizons which extend further than the book by which an individual makes worlds which could not, to that moment, have existed. But since these orientations seem to be describable and – this is certainly a contentious point – communicable, a claim on objectivity underwrites each reading.

Those who argue, against Hirsch, that the relative objectivity of meaning as against signification can only be maintained as a subjectively grounded preference seem to me to have the best of the dispute. If I think of something as being the meaning of a text, there is no gainsaying me until I feel sufficiently shamed by a better argument; and that is always my doing, not the argument’s. Change of perspective does not indicate that the argument which has recently persuaded me is superior to the one I have discarded, only that I have become persuaded that it is better. For even at this point – at any point – I keep the possibility of contriving new arguments to maintain a prejudice. This is so whether or not I recognise that what drives me is a predisposition rather than the finding of good reasons to support a belief grounded in an instinctual affinity.

The theory I’ve been outlining is perhaps nearest to Norman Holland’s, insofar as Holland speaks of literary works being mediated through the ‘characteristic patterns of defence’ of the reader. But an expectation of having certain qualities in oneself enlivened, or enhanced, or of being introduced to ‘higher’ states, is far from being the kind of psychological reverse osmosis Holland’s theory brings to mind. Almost the opposite of that, I suggest.

Potentially, the argument most troublesome to the claim to novelty of this description is implied in Gillian Dooley’s response. This is the observation that it is little more than a latter-day re-affirmation of the venerable liberal humanist project of self-improvement, a continuation of its dream of turning base into precious metal. Though the objection has some purchase, there is still I think the significant difference that the liberal humanist project for literature as just described had – has – a tendency to presume that every sincere reader of sufficient acumen will be able to tell the difference between literature and pot-boilers. In addition to offering carte blanche to unsupported preferences, not very far away from this – noble – project is an academic authoritarianism which, though it might speak softly, is more than capable of carrying a big stick. Easy enough, as a professor of literature, is it not, to slip into the habit of
thinking of those students who agree with one as talented, and to have to be watchful to be fair to those who persist in refusing an opinion with grey hairs behind it?

In the view proposed here, literature is in prospect measurable in and by a range of anticipations which mark specifiable qualities in the individual. Generalised programmes of personal improvement using literature as a measuring stick, on the other hand, tend to fetishize the stick they measure by; and fashionable enthusiasms always, eventually, cascade down the charts.

Qualities of mind, in contrast to projects for improvement, are constantly with us. They can be laid out in detail and differences about them can be specified, discussed, pored over, reevaluated, and used as a measure not only of the literary work, but of one’s position as a reader in relating to that work. Nothing of this requires that agreement be achieved nor even that it stand as a goal of enquiry. ‘Comprehension’ need not mean ‘inclusion’, but only, at its most modest, that a more thorough understanding be reached of disagreements which might even be allowed to remain, should no good reason be found to abandon them.