

## **Literary art for reading's sake**

A review of Anders Pettersson's *The Concept of Literary Application: Readers' Analogies from Text to Life*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 250 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-03541-7.

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### **1. The value of a literary text for a reader**

Within the discussion of the value of literature, a continuing dialogue exists on its nature and status. When considered as an art form, literature is valued for its unique qualities independent of any cultural and individual expectations of use, as in *l'art pour l'art*. Yet at the same time, the form and content of literature is viewed as embodying certain characteristics that may evoke positively viewed cognitive and emotional outcomes for language learning and individual development. Both the aesthetic view and more instrumental views of literature maintain a type of supremacy of the literary text over actual acts of reading. In seeking an understanding of the value of literature, Anders Pettersson's *Concept of Literary Application* is significant as it attempts to shift direction in the discussion by theorizing actual experiences of reading and views of literary texts, while challenging many institutional beliefs about the status of literature and the nature of a literary response by an individual reader.

### **2. Applying literature to life**

Individual readers, according to Pettersson, create value of a literary work by using a selected idea or theme of the text to shed new light on an element of their own personal experience or reality. They may also use aspects of their representation of the text to help them articulate an unexpressed thought or feeling. Thus the basis for the value of literature, as well as the literary experience itself, is found by applying a select part of a text to real life during or after acts of reading.

Pettersson claims that application is a genuine literary response to a text. Specifically, Pettersson defines application as an activity involving a reader 1) focusing on certain aspects of a text, and then 2) comparing and 3) evaluating elements of their text representation with their own sense of reality. Thus application stands in strict contrast to the cultural and institutional conception of the literary experience. Here a reader may discover the meaning of a text by reading the work as a self-contained aesthetic object in form and content, while relating its parts to a constructed whole. Furthermore, the text can be situated as an expression of a certain time and space, as well as representing a reality conceived of by an author without any obligation to external reality. Thus literary application is a challenge to the traditional hermeneutic norm, whereby the parts should help the reader construct or reconstruct a world unlike their own. Pettersson states that his overall aim is to provide an in-depth discussion of the concept of application as a legitimate, though often overlooked and undervalued, aspect of the literary experience.

That the reading experience of literature by some individuals may involve reading for ideas, values and knowledge based on personal experience and making comparisons with reality is not an unfamiliar phenomenon within literary studies. Literary critics and literary historians recognize this form of reading comprehension and interpretation, yet they find it superficial. Pettersson claims that application is actually a genuine aspect of literary practice, even fundamental to literary studies. The *Concept of Literary Application*, with its 12 chapters covering 250 pages with endnotes for each chapter, an elaborate biography and index, approaches this thesis by conveying several empirical studies of reading and attitudes towards literature, as well as presenting and critiquing many established views of literature and art within aesthetic philosophy and literary studies.

### 3. Cultural constructs and idiosyncratic responses

The book shows that the value of literature is not to be found in the work itself, but by the way readers engage with a text. Specifically, Pettersson suggests that the literary experience is motivated by four factors that make the reading of literature unique though not completely unrelated to the way persons experience the external world. Literary experience is characterized 1) by making abstract ideas more concrete, enabling persons to establish connections more easily between the text and experience, 2) by forming imagined realities of an author into meaningful patterns that might be ambiguous but deliberately designed, 3) by conveying ideas about life and reality that are more open to interpretation than non-fiction texts, and finally 4) by taking place in contexts of a reader's own choosing, enabling persons to ponder and even daydream about problems and issues. Thus literary application is shaped through different aspects of the text and the personal disposition of the reader. Theorizing this form of literary interaction is supported by some theoretical and empirical research on the reading of literature. Pettersson also conveys research from non-English speaking sources to support this view of literary experience.

Pettersson claims that the act of literary application is psychologically more realistic than conventional, aesthetic views of literature. In particular, Pettersson shows that the view of the literary text as an aesthetic object, which he refers to as the "delightful-object view" of art, emerges from different cultural constructs and metaphors, such as the conduit metaphor. In the book, there are many different institutional theories about literature that are presented and then critiqued according to Pettersson's "literary application" concept. Thereby the book provides an overview of different institutional beliefs about the cognitive and emotional outcomes from literature, such as transportation, empathy, simulation and identification. Importantly, the book implies that, in general, many institutional conventions may actually constrain us from understanding the true nature of a literary response.

As a form of reflection on his own construct, Pettersson writes in Chapter 11, titled "Questions of Norms and Values", that the assessment of a literary response by others is based on different preferential values and beliefs about interpretation. By returning to three protocols of good and poor examples of application, Pettersson suggests that so-called misunderstandings of a text are indeed possible. But they would not be viewed as a genuine literary response since they would transcend expected understandings of a text. But according to Pettersson, the cognitive and emotional outcomes of a literary experience are always idiosyncratic to a certain degree, reflecting what the reader finds significant, shaped by their own sense of reality. Accordingly, application challenges the supremacy of the literary text as a cultural artifact over personal experience.

### 4. A problematic development of a significant idea

While it is indeed significant and novel to shift focus from the nature of literature to the nature of reading, it should be noted that the development of the theory of literary application is empirically and theoretically limited. In particular, there is not much focus on readers' actual analogies from text to life, as the title suggests. Indeed with more than half of the book focused on critiquing institutional constructs, theorizing application is not developed thoroughly enough. At times, it is presented as an ontological fact, while remaining unclear how application distinguishes itself from actual acts of reading and interpretation.

Even though Pettersson conveys and compares an established psychological theory of reading with application, namely the "situation model", there seems to be a heavy burden placed on the reader to keep the activity of reading, interpretation and application separate. This may have to do with Pettersson's word choice and his use of concepts. Regarding word choice, sometimes Petersen writes that application is an activity whereby readers compare the text to their own life and reality, yet according to his own construct, it is not the text that is compared but the reader's constructed representation based on a reading strategy that involves the reader drawing on their own experience.

This way of presenting the “situation model” is also problematic. The situation model is a form of domain knowledge of various entities and activities, including abstract knowledge of texts used to create a representation of a text during reading (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1991). A well-developed situation model would constrain readers’ automatic processing involving their own contemporary sense of reality (Peskin 1998). Pettersson simply dismisses this central idea by providing his own reading of a literary text as an illustration of application. For instance, he hypothesizes a reader without experiential knowledge of “tents” to understand a story about camping. Yet instead of examining how the situation model may actually guide the construction of a text representation and avoid early closure, even when readers are confronted with a text beyond their own experience of camping, he insists on the idea that analogy between world and acts of reading are necessary for understanding a text. Thus he says, “in the building of a situation model, the reader draws on the world to understand the text”.

Hence, his form of argumentation and rhetorical style makes it unclear whether analogy is involved in actual acts of reading comprehension or an activity first after the creation of a text representation. Despite his own claims of providing a detailed exploration of the mechanisms involved, especially in one of the final chapters, it is difficult to observe how Pettersson gets from introducing the concept and the few examples of reader analogies to stating quite emphatically at the end that “literature owes its existence to analogical thinking”.

Furthermore, given that the cognitive process of analogy is so central an aspect of literary application, it is surprising, for theory development, that the juxtaposition of application and analogy is only presented in a couple of sections. In the beginning of the book, Pettersson points to Gadamer’s use of application as a source of inspiration, while distancing himself from the philosopher’s central premises about texts and reading. The connection is then noted in a footnote with references to the author’s own work and with a reference to chapter 12, the last chapter, where Pettersson takes a final look at his concept as a general mechanism in human thinking. He states that application is comparable to “analogical thinking” as conceived by Keith Holyoak and Paul Thagard. Yet the connection is not further developed theoretically nor in relation to the limited empirical research referred to in the book. Recognizing the complexities involved in acts of reading and interpreting, the reader would benefit if the word “analogy” would have been included in the index as a cue to help reconstruct Pettersson’s intentions.

There are other choices regarding organization and content for the book that make the development of the theory of application seem somewhat paradoxical. For instance, it seems illogical to rely on a very limited selection of empirical data of the reading experiences of untrained readers and their attitudes towards literature, while comparing and criticizing aesthetic and literary theories of literature typically used for enhancing language development and critical thinking in educational institutions. Yet Pettersson admits that his intentions are not to examine “literary-critical interpretation”. His aim is to contribute to examining a theory of the reading of literature.

Given his aims, an alternative reason for this inconsistency may then be attributed to a poorly defined construct of a reader, based more on Pettersson’s personal intuition than empirical studies (cf. Grabe & Stoller 2002). Other research on language development shows that individuals can be broadly categorized along a continuum of experienced and novice readers, with competencies such as reading for knowledge and information, like Pettersson’s reader, to individuals reading for different views and multiple perspectives on reality to readers actually capable of constructing worldviews unlike their own experience (Fitzgerald 2000). Accordingly, Pettersson’s reader is a novice reader, decontextualized from any institutional setting and beliefs about literature from schooling other than their own leisure time and pleasure.

Nevertheless, a focus on novice readers is still significant for examining and re-conceptualizing a theory of the reading of literature. But Pettersson seems to simplify his own position and the views of others on these issues. Rhetorically, this reveals itself, for instance, when

Pettersson criticizes the aesthetic views of John Gibson, calling the premises for his work superficial and misleading since they rely on everyday metaphors of meaning and texts, like the conduit metaphor. Yet what Pettersson's own discussion of the conduit metaphor lacks is that despite the semantic pathology embodied in our language about language, activities like learning to read or talking about a book are socially dependent on the conduit metaphor as a cultural structure for these types of activities to take place. Even Pettersson cannot avoid the conduit metaphor in its various forms. When talking about reading, he refers to "objective meaning" in language and then the "subjective" application of it to life and reality.

Another problematic rhetorical strategy for theory development concerns Pettersson's form of argumentation. Namely, he suggests that a critical stance exists towards application as he conceives it. For instance, he writes, "Gibson explicitly questions the aesthetic relevance of application" and later on he says, "Many thinkers about literature are unwilling to accept application as one of the adequate responses to literary art". Yet his presentation of the literature does not refer to any studies that directly take issue with his concept in a dialectical fashion expected of academic discourse. Despite the tremendous overview of literary theory and constructs the book contains, Pettersson seems regrettably to use his knowledge to attack established traditions, especially the textual supremacy view and related issues, by constructing a critical position of literary application that does not explicitly exist.

### **5. The individual and cultural value of a literary response to texts**

As a reader, and especially aware of my social role as reviewer, I have, in the spirit of John Dewey, attempted to "willingly suspend disbelief", in order to be as open-minded as possible in order to engage with a text by another writer with different premises. In this sense, I have attempted to read the book according to an institutional conception of a literary text, namely that texts have the potential to be read as representing a world unlike one's own. Thus I was eager to play the game "hermeneutically" without superimposing my own ideas and beliefs. Yet according to the concept of literary application, this form of reading is psychologically unrealistic. Some readers may be schooled to read this way, but most people do not.

As mentioned, psychological and educational research on reading comprehension demonstrates that some individual persons may read for information and knowledge as it relates to their contemporary social and material reality, while others may actually be able to construct or reconstruct a worldview unlike their own. This book can be read in a similar fashion. It can be read for its many parts, such as references, topics, research findings and theory, as information that may or may not have significance for a reader. Yet the book can also be read for how these parts add up to a whole. Regarding the latter strategy, the underlying worldview unfortunately resembles the negative critique and negative case building strategy of developing an idea present within academics (Stjernfelt & Thomsen 2005).

Despite this negative approach to the common pursuit of understanding the value of literature, the focus on the reading experience of literature remains a significant idea to explore towards the goal of understanding the value of reading literature for its own sake, but also for shedding new light on the institutional practice of using literary texts to enhance language acquisition and learning, as well as for individual knowledge growth (Langer 1990) and cultural development within society (Miall & Kuiken 1999).

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