

UNDERSTANDING LITERARY READING: THE NEED FOR A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH?

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Abstract

This is a review essay of *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*, edited by Olivia Fialho, Sonia Zyngier and Michael Burke (2016), a collection of essays that locate themselves within a philosophical framework that is different from my own. My aim in writing this essay is to reflect on how these essays speak to me, for all the differences between the 'scientific' standpoint advocated by these researchers and my own position, and to find points of intersection between my approach towards literature and the approaches presented in this collection.

Keywords: language education, literary knowledge, scientific approaches to literary reading.

Literary critical debates revolve around bigger questions than the formal skills required when reading. Even when the focus of commentary is ostensibly on how to read a literary work, as in Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem*, it does not take long before you are confronted by questions about what it means to read and how this is bound up with what it means to be human. The motivation for writing this study was Eagleton's perception that the students whom he encountered no longer practiced literary criticism as he had been taught to do it. That is, they did not engage in 'close reading' (Eagleton, 2007, p. 1). Yet through revisiting the question of how to read and respond to the language of poetry, Eagleton does more than exemplify the knowledge and skills involved in reading of this kind. The whole point of Eagleton's study is to affirm the importance of poetry for allowing us to 'experience the very medium of our experience' (p. 68) vis-à-vis a forgetfulness about language that impoverishes us. We are taken, in short, to questions that are at the heart of our being.

Vygotsky similarly turns to poetry in order to explore larger questions about life. The importance of literary works for Vygotsky is bound up with his belief in the primacy of language as both the material of inner speech and the medium through which we participate in the life around us. Literary works provide insight into the pathway from inner speech to the language that we share with others (cf. Barrs, 2016, p. 250). A poem provides a window on that space where 'inner and outer worlds of experience meet' (Barrs, 2016, p. 247). We are faced, in short, with a proposition about the interface between our private worlds and the public spaces in which we operate, about the essentially social nature of our lives and the role that language plays in bringing together our inner selves with an outer world.

So even when we might be reading a fairly dispassionate analysis of what it means to read a page, and specifically how we might differentiate between the dispositions we bring to a poem or a novel and the more pragmatic purposes we might have when reading (say) a set of instructions or an information brochure, we are grappling with questions about not only how to read but what it means to be a reader. Every statement about reading is a statement about who you are and your place in the world. It implies a vision of society and where people fit within it.

These reflections have been occasioned by my reading of a collection of essays entitled *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*, edited by Michael Burke, Olivia Fialho and Sonia Zyngier. This book is part of a series that provides 'an international forum for researchers who believe that the application of linguistic methods leads to a deeper and more far-reaching understanding of many aspects of literature' (see <https://benjamins.com/catalog/books/lal/main>). Perusing the titles in this series, I have asked myself how research of this kind might speak to my own work as an English educator and literary scholar, and this question provides the focus of this essay. For the notion of 'scientific approaches to literature' hardly matches my own education and the beliefs I hold as a researcher and teacher. My education has taught me to think about science and the interpretive practices I employ when reading a literary work as fundamentally distinct, if not in radical opposition to one another. But nothing would have been easier for

me than to cast this book aside as embodying an approach to inquiry that I do not share, and in reading the essays in this volume I have found it intriguing to consider how it might be possible for me to enter into dialogue with researchers who are working within a different paradigm of inquiry to my own. Our common goal is surely to enhance the quality of a literary education as it is experienced by students in schools, universities and other educational settings, and so it is worth considering what we might learn from each other.

I have foregrounded my own situation as a reader of this volume, as this is surely one of the most important lessons that we might take from advances in our understanding of reading over the past few decades, and specifically debates about the nature of a literary reading: that any reading of a text is a function of the situation in which it occurs and the expectations and values we bring to our encounter with it (cf. Reid, 1984). This is very much a feature of the way we interact with literary works, when we become reflexively aware of how we are interpreting the words on the page in the process of reading a novel or poem, but I think that it is also true of the way we engage with more analytical works, such as the volume I am reviewing here. For my reading of this volume has been shaped by my current concerns about the way literary reading has recently been constructed in debates in my own country and more widely in the Anglophone world.

If I were asked to name the two studies that have influenced my day-to-day practice as a literature teacher most decisively, I would nominate Ian Reid's *The Making of Literature: Texts, Contexts and Classroom Practices* (Reid, 1984) and Jack Thomson's *Understanding Teenagers' Reading: Reading Processes and the Teaching of Literature* (1987). They were both published by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, and I think it is fair to say that they had a major impact on how English teachers in Australia understood the place of literature in the curriculum and how they could best support their students to benefit from reading literary texts. I will leave Reid's study aside, as it is not central to my argument here, though it informs everything that I have just written about the situated nature of reading (see Reid, 1984, pp. 53-74). For the moment I want to briefly focus on Thomson's study, as I think it usefully provides a bridge to the book that I am reviewing, and an indication as to why this book has been of interest to me.¹

Thomson's *Understanding Teenagers' Reading* was an influential text in which he showed what you can learn from young people if you attend to what they say about their reading, the pleasures they derive from certain texts, and how they go about constructing meaning from such encounters. This was a ground-breaking study, largely because of Thomson's starting point: he had interviewed young people about the novels they had read, treating them as authorities when it came to

¹ Some of the following reflections on *Understanding Teenagers' Reading* derive from an essay I recently published in *Changing English*. See Doecke, 2016.

talking about the pleasures and challenges they experienced when reading. The interviewees were from the Bathurst district of New South Wales where Thomson taught. He thereby provided a powerful model to teachers everywhere in Australia, showing how much they could learn by listening carefully to what their students had to report to them about their reading habits and preferences. If you pick up Thomson's book, you cannot fail to be impressed by the elegance of the research design that shaped his study, and the careful way in which he reports what the students had to say, both their responses to survey questions and in one-on-one interviews with him.

Yet while Thomson's study undoubtedly had a positive effect on how English teachers in Australia taught reading, encouraging them to provide students with a wider range of reading and to attend more carefully to their tastes and enthusiasms in order to build on their individual abilities, it also serves to illustrate what I think has been a problematical turn in English teaching in Australia. For on the basis of their experiences of reading that the teenagers reported to him, Thomson constructed a 'developmental model' of 'response to literature' that is questionable for several reasons. Beginning with 'unreflective interest in action' as a first level of engagement in fictional texts, it progresses through 'empathising' and 'analogueing', culminating in a capacity to recognise something that Thomson calls 'textual ideology' and a reflexive consciousness of one's reading strategies (Thomson, 1987, p. 360). Thomson is at pains in *Understanding Teenagers' Reading* to emphasize that one level of response does not necessarily displace another, that the pleasure of immersing yourself in the action and identifying with the characters of a story should not ultimately conflict with a capacity to identify the text's 'ideology'. But it is impossible not to see the final level of—as Thomson formulates it—a 'consciously considered relationship with the author, recognition of textual ideology, and understanding of self [identity theme] and of one's own reading process' (p. 360) as throwing the other dimensions into perspective. This is, after all, a construction of an ideal reader that provides the goal to which teachers ought to strive in their attempts to enable students to grow as readers, which comprehends all the other phases of the 'developmental' model and ultimately gives point to them as staging posts towards achieving this goal.

But what kind of ideal reader is this? It remains difficult not to conclude that 'critical engagement', thus conceived, does not render the pleasures of the text suspect because they can blind people to the ideological designs that texts have on them. This is a familiar position that is argued by advocates of so-called 'critical literacy', which has since led some of its staunchest advocates to agonise over whether there is a role for the 'aesthetic' in the reading of literary texts understood in this way. Wendy Morgan and Ray Misson, who are both well known for promoting what they call 'the critical literacy agenda' (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. ix), set out to investigate how 'a pedagogy of reading' (p. xvii) might be reconfigured to 'cope with the aesthetic and all the attendant aspects of human experience' (p. xix) on the basis of their disquiet about the apparent incapacity of 'critical literacy' to find a place for the 'aesthetic'. Although this blindness might suggest that the

whole enterprise has been flawed, Misson and Morgan are at pains to affirm that they 'are both still thoroughly committed to the critical literacy agenda' (p. xx). The primary emphasis remains on enabling readers to identify the 'ideology' of the text. This is not to deny the pleasures of reading, such as that of being swept up by the suspense of a story or empathizing with its characters, but the ideal reader implied here is one who is ultimately able to see beyond such pleasures in order to expose the ideological work that a text is performing. The language is still one of demystification, of enabling readers to 'resist' the text's blandishments and to recognise the partial nature of its representation of the world (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 71, p. 73, p. 76, p. 88, p. 91, p. 93; cf. Morgan, 1987, p. 12, p. 16; Misson, 1990, p. 21).

My concern here, however, is less with the problematical assumptions of 'critical literacy' as such than with the turn taken by Thomson's argument in *Understanding Teenagers' Reading*, when he postulates a sixth level of response that involves a recognition of 'textual ideology'. I say 'postulates' because in his study Thomson admits that he had been unable to find abundant evidence of this level of response in anything that his interviewees had reported to him about their reading (p. 224). There were traces of a reflexive awareness when engaging with literary texts evident in some comments, but none of his interviewees talked about the 'ideology' of the text. Thomson conscientiously details their responses to his interview prompts, teasing out and speculating about where they might fit into his developmental model. He also scrupulously acknowledges sources for this model in earlier work by D. W. Harding and Jane Blunt (p. 168), thus conveying a sense of dialectical interplay between the richness of the interview data and the analytical categories that he is bringing to his analysis of it. But with the sixth level of response he moves beyond the interview data he has gathered, postulating an accomplished reader that is nowhere to be found in what the interviewees have had to report about their experience of reading. Indeed, he somewhat disarmingly remarks that 'the reason no students conscientiously engaged in the activities of this level is that there is no systematic discussion of such activities in the schools' (p. 224). He moves, in short, from reporting and analyzing the interviewees' responses to advocating an approach to reading that is no doubt teachable, but which constitutes a decisive intervention in students' reading that requires them to construct texts from a particular standpoint conceived as external to the text, as a project for social emancipation understood as something that people can be brought to rationally embrace. This standpoint is a counter-intuitive one that is typically conceived as unmasking the 'ideology' of the text, reflecting a 'critical' awareness that renders the familiar pleasures of reading, such as immersion in the world of the story, empathy, and responsiveness to language, suspect. The moment of 'critical literacy' in Australia has, indeed, produced many engaging accounts by teachers and researchers of how they have alerted students to the 'ideology' of the text (see, e.g., Howie, 2006), but the question of whether this taught response adequately comprehends all the dimensions of reading (and specifically a literary reading) goes begging. The paradox, as far as Thomson's study is concerned, is that he effectively shifts his focus away from trying to understand how teenagers read to

postulating a model of 'critical' engagement that has its justification elsewhere, in a vision of social emancipation that involves a capacity to see through ideology. In this respect, his study is symptomatic of a turn in both school and tertiary education that discounts the pleasures of reading in order to promote a 'critical' awareness of a certain kind. Thomson steps, in short, from an empirical inquiry into what 'is', when he tries to make sense of the written comments and conversations that the Bathurst teenagers had to offer him about their experiences of reading literary texts, into a vision of what 'ought' to be.

It is this gap between what 'is' and what 'ought' to be that has caused me to attend carefully to the research presented in *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*, for the authors are all in various ways urging the need to once again take heed of what ordinary readers like students have to say about their experiences of reading.

Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments usefully prompts reflection about the kind of empirical ground that might be necessary in order to develop a better understanding of teenagers' reading and specifically the nature of a literary reading as distinct from reading for more pragmatic purposes. The study is not one of a kind but signals a refocusing on literary reading that is also a feature of other research. Recent work by German educators has likewise sought to investigate the skills and knowledge underpinning a literary reading (see Abraham, 2016; Zabka, 2016). As I have remarked elsewhere (see Doecke, 2016), if I were asked to identify the characteristic features of this work, it would be its sustained focus on the 'literary' as a dimension of education (or *Bildung*), a standpoint in marked contrast to that of the advocates of 'critical literacy' whom I have just been discussing, who over the past few decades have consistently problematized those very aspects of a literary education that these researchers make the focus of their attention. As Thomas Zabka remarks, 'a literary education should build on a primary level of responsiveness towards literature, involving empathy and immersion in the world of the text' (Zabka, 2016, p. 227).

The stance of these German researchers involves accepting as a legitimate object for inquiry the manifold ways in which literary works mediate our relationships with one another and the formation of our identities, as part of a 'cultural praxis' (see e.g. Abraham & Brendel-Perpina, 2015, pp. 115-116; van de Ven & Doecke, 2011). This position is akin to important work within literary studies in Anglophone settings that focuses on the forms of 'sociability' in which people engage (e.g. book clubs, writers' festivals) around literary works (Rubin, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Dixon, 2012; McLean-Davies, Doecke & Mead, 2013). Something broadly similar is happening in the essays assembled in *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*. Rather than dismissing the experiences of ordinary readers from a more critical or theoretical viewpoint, much of this writing seeks to explore those experiences in order to develop a better understanding of the nature of reading,

and specifically the distinctive character of a 'literary' reading. Taken together, the essays in this volume respond to the need for empirical inquiry that might enable us to develop a more refined understanding of how our students engage in reading a literary work, the kinds of challenges they face, the repertoire of skills and understandings they are able to draw on, and the significance they ascribe to textual exchanges of this kind.

Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments begins with a chapter by the editors, Olivia Fialho, Sonia Zyngier and Michael Burke, which does more than introduce the chapters that follow, but canvasses a wider range of publications in order to map the field of 'empirical approaches to the study of literature in learning environments' (p. 1). The chapter is typical of the chapters that comprise this volume, serving to open up the work of researchers who are committed to providing literary studies with an empirical or scientific basis, and the book is worth consulting for the reference lists alone. It becomes apparent that the concept of 'learning environments' in the book's title extends beyond formal institutional contexts to embrace other settings (p. 8). 'Reading', as the editors comment, 'is not necessarily a solitary activity' (p. 8), and in the chapters that follow attention is devoted to reflecting on the pleasures that people derive from participating in book clubs (see, e.g., pp. 58-59), as well as to the role that reading literary texts plays in school and university settings. The emphasis in just about all the chapters falls on reading as an ordinary pursuit, as something that is embedded in everyday situations, though—as the second chapter by Frank Hakemulder, Olivia Fialho and P. Matthijs Bal shows—this typically combines with traditional claims about the humanizing role ascribed to literature. Those claims are presented in the form of a set of 'hypotheses' that require empirical investigation: '(a) reading literature stimulates readers' moral imagination, that is, it enhances their self-examination; (b) it deepens their understanding of what it must be like to be in the shoes of others, plausibly increasing empathy and compassion' (Hakemulder, Fialho, & Bal, 2016, p. 20).

This combination of the language of 'science' with traditional humanist beliefs is a feature of nearly all the essays in this volume, in which the authors use words like 'literariness' and 'empathy', while setting out to show 'scientifically' how such dimensions feature in the reading of a literary text. By saying this, I am not in the first instance criticizing their stance, but merely pointing, again, to the marked difference between the approach towards inquiry into literature modeled by the contributors to this volume and that of the exponents of 'critical literacy' whom I have been considering earlier. For the latter, notions like 'moral imagination' and 'empathy' would be subordinate to the task of exploring the 'ideology' of the text.

But I am less concerned here with providing a synopsis of each chapter in this volume than with trying to understand the impulse behind the collection as a whole (the table of contents and abstracts for each chapter can be found on the internet: <https://benjamins.com/#catalog/books/lal.24/toc>). I have already said enough to indicate that in my view it is timely to refocus on questions about the nature of a literary reading. The opening chapter of this volume reflects all that is

best in the following chapters, posing useful questions that challenge prevalent assumptions about the teaching of literature (e.g. the supposition that explicit teaching and critical rigor' are 'at the expense of personal enjoyment' [p. 4]), as well as gesturing towards classroom interventions (e.g. the value of '(unguided) self-questioning' as opposed to 'instructor-prepared questions' for enabling students to interpret and appreciate literary stories [p. 4]). This chapter also contains some useful reflections on the interface between reading literary texts and creative writing in classroom settings, anticipating the argument in one of the best essays in the volume, a clear and eloquently written report on their investigations by Tanja Janssen and Martine Braaksma on the value of enabling students to engage in creative writing as a precursor to reading literary texts. This chapter is useful, in particular, for dislodging teachers from the assumption that responding to literary texts should always take the form of an analytical essay. As the authors observe at the conclusion of their essay, their research might encourage teachers of literature to 'consider incorporating creative writing assignments as a valuable addition to the more conventional analytical forms of writing which are now dominant in the literature classroom' (Janssen & Braaksma, 2016, p. 209).

The editors introduce the volume by envisaging a situation where the methods that are modeled in this book might be taken up by practitioner researchers to the benefit to their students (p. 10). Overall, I think, the book successfully highlights the need for empirical investigation, although when I put it down I was not entirely convinced that such investigations should necessarily take the form of the experiments presented in this volume. The chapter I have just mentioned by Janssen and Braaksma is an impeccable model of scientific research of a certain kind, but not all the chapters in this volume are uniformly successful. Sometimes I felt they amounted to little more than an evaluation of the success or otherwise of a particular intervention, replete with graphs presenting statistical data that did little more than create a knowledge effect. They did not succeed in significantly extending our existing understanding of the nature of a literary reading or the significance of literature in our lives.

What have I learned by reading this volume?

The sources on which the chapters in *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments* draw have opened up my awareness of how the value of literature is being researched and debated in a range of discourse communities beyond my own. As someone whose research has primarily been within the field of English curriculum and pedagogy, it has been useful to step into spaces that are unfamiliar to me. When I think of where to publish an article, I am more likely to consider *English in Australia*, *English in Education*, or *Changing English*, all journals that are historically embedded within the professional culture of English teachers in their respective national settings, rather than the journals that figure within the reference lists of the chapters in this volume. The bodies of research that I have

been accessing through consulting the references in *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments* all situate themselves outside this nexus between language education and its national setting, and the cultural praxis (Abraham & Brendel-Perpina, 2015) in which arguments about the value of literature and a literary education have traditionally been played out. This volume has prompted me, in short, to reflexively engage with the values and beliefs that I bring to my work as a literature teacher because of my sense of the difference between its 'scientific' orientation and my own standpoint as an English teacher.

Yet it would have also been desirable if the authors of this volume themselves had displayed a more reflexive stance with regard to the claims they are making for the value of 'scientific approaches' to literature. Both the chapters that comprise this volume and the sources on which they draw herald a 'new' approach to understanding the nature of a literary reading without showing much awareness of debates amongst scholars working within other frameworks. The references cited in each chapter have certainly enabled me to develop a better understanding of the discourse community out of which this work emerged, introducing me to writing that showcases the insights that a 'scientific' or 'empirical' investigation can make available with regard to literature, but too often I was left feeling that I was listening to a conversation that did not include me.

In this respect I think the Foreword to this volume by David Miall, including the claim that 'we are now witnessing a new paradigm for literary studies rising above the horizon' (p. ix), is unfortunate. Rather than conceiving the field of literary studies as a common object of inquiry to which a range of approaches might be applied, Miall's Foreword sets up binaries, most notably between the experiences of so-called 'ordinary' readers (p. viii) and the sophistication of critics applying 'imported French theory' (p. vii) in their efforts to produce further interpretations of texts. Miall has written a whole book advocating the value of 'experimental approaches to readers' responses to literature' (Miall, 2006, p. 23) where the problematical nature of his standpoint is on full display. The fact that 'few literary scholars have thought of asking ordinary readers what occurs when they read' is somehow taken to render the whole enterprise of literary scholarship as belonging to some kind of pre-scientific phase that we are about to put behind us. Indeed, we learn that the advent of empirical inquiry in literary studies, as he understands it, is akin to the way 'evolutionary theory has replaced creationism' (p. 12). Such claims cannot be taken seriously, or indeed be read as any kind of defensible 'scientific' standpoint vis-à-vis the ongoing cultural praxis that centres on the production and reception of literary texts (cf. Allington & Swann, 2009).

I began this essay by saying that any statement about reading is a statement about human beings and the world they inhabit. My objection to Miall's understanding of empirical inquiry into 'literariness', as he puts it, signals my distance from the world view that underpins his research. There may, indeed, be a need to inquire into the

practices of so-called 'ordinary' readers, but when those readers are constructed as being 'outside' an institutional culture that produces literary scholars and students (Miall & Kuiken, 1998, p. 328), binaries are obviously coming into play that demand scrutiny. This kind of language undermines any call to refocus on what readers do with texts, and—just as crucially—how their activities are mediated by the social settings in which they occur. For those activities are mediated: by family, by school and other institutional settings, by social networks that involve reading and sharing literary texts. Ordinary readers cannot be posited as though their lives are not mediated by larger social and cultural contexts. Nor can 'literariness' be conceived as something that transcends the social and historical contexts in which people have identified a body of writing as 'literary', as though canonical works exist in a realm beyond those contexts, possessing 'innate powers' regardless of the 'class or education' of their readers and the social settings in which they read and respond to texts (Miall, 2006, pp. 15-16, p. 21). 'Literary values', declares Miall at the start of *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments*, 'are inherent, we are born with them; and they will endure, and remain available whatever the scientific work with texts or their readers that we conduct' (Miall, 2016, p. viii). This is a culturally conservative position that compromises any commitment to 'empirical studies on literary reading' (p. 11).

Despite the criticisms that I have leveled at Thomson's *Understanding Teenagers' Reading*, his study remains a model of what an empirical investigation into literary reading might be. It is, after all, noteworthy that Miall's claims on behalf of 'ordinary' or what he also calls 'real' readers (Miall & Kuiken, 1998, p. 329) are made without any acknowledgement of the considerable body of research conducted by teachers and researchers working in classroom settings. It is out of this tradition of inquiry—associated with the names of people like James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen and John Dixon—that Thomson's study emerged, not to mention the extensive work of practitioners that has always been a strong feature of the Australian scene. For a variety of reasons, such work has been undermined, not least because of the advent of standards-based reforms that privilege the knowledge produced through standardized testing over the observations in which teachers engage in the course of their ongoing professional practice. Educators need to revisit the question of how to observe and to learn from the students in their classrooms. They need to engage in empirical studies that have a truly reflexive character, involving continual scrutiny of the attitudes and values they bring to an inquiry. *Scientific Approaches to Literature in Learning Environments* provides a valuable resource for that inquiry, but ultimately it remains only one resource amongst many.

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