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How Novels Feel
Emotional and Rational Reading
Processes in Contemporary Fiction

Astrid Lohöfer:

*Emotional and rational reading
processes: Current research*

Two “autofictional” novels about
literary reading:

Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (1977)
David Williams, *Eye of the Father* (1985)

Our thesis

both texts challenge the equation
professional (i.e., academic) =
rational reading

Current psychological research about
the relationship between emotionality
and rationality

Emotions as an aid to cognition or as
a source of self-deception ?

Emotional literary reading as irrational, dangerous (e.g. *Madame Bovary*)

or as stimulating cognitive processes?

Keith Oatley (1994), “emotions of literary response”:

text-external emotions (e.g. defamiliarization, curiosity about the plot)

text-internal emotions (e.g. identification with the characters)

“autofiction”:

a new, self-reflexive autobiographical writing;

a new approach to the dualism of real-life experience and aesthetic distance

Christine Ott:

Text-analysis and self-analysis in Serge Doubrovsky's Fils (1977)

The beginning of the text:

“Professor Doubrovsky’s” evening lecture about Racine’s *Phèdre*

In a dream, he mixes up his own memories with the final monster-scene of Racine’s drama

Phèdre (1677):

The young hero Hippolyte is defamed by his mother-in-law Phèdre and finally dragged to death by his horses which have been frightened by a sea monster

“Serge Doubrovsky’s” psychoanalyst proposes a traditional Freudian interpretation of the dream

The protagonist feels unsatisfied with this analysis, as well as with all the traditional interpretations of Racine

Evening lecture:

“Professor Doubrovsky” begins to improvise;
allows his personal dispositions to penetrate his critical discourse, thus overcoming traditional Racine research

In *Fils*, Serge Doubrovsky develops a new, emotional and identificational method of literary interpretation

Novelty of Doubrovsky’s text and theory:

- acceptance of cognitive impediments
- contingency of interpretation
- interpretation as “feeding” the text

1 - Acceptance of cognitive impediments

The text prompts an epistemological process in which the reader encounters cognitive impediments to be resolved concurrent with the identification with the protagonist

2 - Contingency of interpretation:

Every literary interpretation is influenced (and also stimulated) by subjective and contingent factors

3 - Interpretation means “feeding” the text (with one’s own life):

Structuralist methods reduce literary texts to *general* structures, as much as traditional psychoanalysis reduces individuals to generalizing schemes

Interpretation should not only unveil the text’s archetypal skeleton, but flesh it out with the interpreter’s subjectivity

Wolfram Keller:

Literary and biographical epiphanies in David Williams’s Eye of the Father (1985)

Underlying subplot: Nordic mythology, particularly the *Edda*

Wayne, a professor of literature, and his wife Karen wish to adopt a child, but suffer from their own family history

“‘Maybe I should ask you first,’ her eyes didn’t waver, ‘before I pay for a one-way ticket. Will you go to see your grandfather or not?’ / He set her suitcases down smartly and walked off” (151)

Wayne’s student Sheila on *Baldr’s Dreams*: “I don’t think a god has to take his frustrations out on a woman” (151).

“The poet has to invent some way for Othin to reveal himself in this unusual chronology. And he has to do it within the usual brief space, so he can only do it by implication. But in effect he asks ‘Which girls will be ready to be buried with Baldr?’ ‘Isn’t that just what I’ve been saying all along,’ Sheila sat up indignantly. ‘The gods of the Vikings are only looking for scapegoats.’ But even as she stared at him, he saw her resentment turn to concern. Professor Goodman? Are you alright?” (158)

“He had not been right to let her [Karen] stand in his stead. [...]. Shame made him dizzy, as if the floor were opening all around him. He could only hope that the old boy was still kicking, that he might get there in time” (159).

Conclusions

- 1) Traditional literary scholarship needs to take into account insights of cognitive criticism
- 2) (Empirical) cognitive criticism could benefit from relevant questions and challenges posed by literature