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ABSTRACT

The literary critic should be both a good detective and a naive observer in finding out what is going on in a literary work and passing on that knowledge to those wishing to use it in furthering their reading pleasure. Rather than formulating value judgments about a piece of literature, critics must use their experiences to illuminate important literary clues for the benefit of the reading public. But they must also remain free enough from expectations to be able to detect clues from a fresh viewpoint. Literary criticism free from preconceptions may be understood by imagining the way a visitor from Mars might view the story of Little Red Riding Hood, asking various questions about details in the story. In addition, "Martian thinking" can help to explain the use of coincidence in fiction, such as in works of Charles Dickens, for whom coincidence was a way of life. (JM)

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Literary Critic: The Detective Not the Judge

Police detectives find evidence to solve cases because they know what to expect from the scenes they investigate. Occasionally, however, the detectives do not find the evidence because their expectations blind them to the significance of facts not fulfilling these expectations. Sometimes a detective recognizes the significance of his facts only when a comment by a naive observer shows the detective that he found the unexpected. If the literary critic understands this process he can apply it to the study of literature and avoid errors of evaluation.

The police detective must know what to expect. An experienced detective once handed me a picture of a death scene and asked me to tell him the cause of death. The picture showed a nude man hanging by his neck from a cord tied to bathroom fixtures, so I immediately said "suicide." This is what my inexperience had led me to assume. His greater experience in police matters showed him where to look for further evidence which led to the conclusion of accidental death while engaged in a sexual perversion previously unknown to me. The successful detective knows how to evaluate a photograph of a death scene. He makes a decision of fact. Other facts provide an automatic test of the detective's evaluation. Following this example, the literary critic's evaluations should also be subject to factual test. The more experience the literary critic has, the more he knows what to expect from each situation. He does not, however, always find what he expects and he will never know that he has made an error if his evaluation is not objectively verifiable. This is the pitfall of evaluation in literature, which indicates that the critic should be a detective not a judge.

The challenge of a good detective story is to put a unique twist into the situation so that the detective looks in the right place, but does not know what he has found. The detective and the reader with him, then must re-examine every detail until the significance of some fact that has been "staring him in the face" becomes clear. Frequently, the breakthrough occurs when the story's experienced detective hero overhears a comment by a naive observer. The hero then suddenly realizes that his expectations from hundreds of similar cases have made him so certain of what to look for that he has failed to realize a slight discrepancy between what he was looking for and what he has found.

A similar process structures the critic's search for literary clues. The bright, experienced reader knows what to expect. He knows what to look for; so he finds things that even a brilliant naive reader misses. But on occasion, like the hero of the detective story, the experienced critic knows so well what to look for that he assumes he has found it when he has not.

Hamlet's Ophelia is a case in point. Answer this question true or false: Did Ophelia commit suicide? Anyone answering "true," probably _knows_ what drives people to suicide in Renaissance Revenge Tragedy, and perhaps even predicted Ophelia's demise many scenes before the Queen enters to announce it.

My earlier example of police detection bears directly on Ophelia's situation. From a police point of view, Ophelia died accidentally, not by suicide. In fact, her case is clearer than many drownings because the Queen quotes an eyewitness who says quite decidedly that Ophelia died by accident.

In answer to Laertes' question, "Drowned! O, Where?" the Queen replies:

> There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
> There with fantastic garlands did she come
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
> There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
> Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;
> And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:
> Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and indued
> Unto that element: but long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death. (Act IV, sc. VII, ll. 165-185)

These words make it clear that Ophelia did not commit suicide. Rather, in the charming, irresponsible childishness of her insanity, she climbed a tree branch to hang her "coronet weeds" on the "pendent boughs." At the wrong time "an envious sliver broke," and she fell into the brook. Premeditated death is out of the question. A confused Ophelia drowned "As one incapable of her own distress." Nothing could be clearer, yet one hears otherwise knowledgeable people mentioning casually that Ophelia committed suicide.

This example probably throws more light on the nature of our expectations in reading literature than it does on the interpretation of Shakespeare's play. It probably matters little, for the play, whether Hamlet is guilty of driving Ophelia to suicide or whether his actions merely drove her to a gentle, pathetic insanity that allowed her to accidentally fall into a stream and drown. But the misreading on the part of so many sharp, careful observers says much about the nature of expectations in literary criticism.

Many evaluative problems are only problems because what happens in the literary work contradicts the expectations of the "experienced detectives, of English departments. To take another example from Hamlet, many experienced readers discuss the problem of Hamlet's delay, as if it was a sanctioned fact. Someone unaware of the "delay problem" can easily take delight in the opportunity for Hamlet's greatest soliloquies and enjoy other dramatically effective scenes which arise from the delay: Hamlet's out-witting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Hamlet's startling scenes with Ophelia;

Hamlet's using feigned madness for an excuse to finally tell off tiresome old Polonius; Hamlet's telling the players his theory of acting; and the exciting play scene itself all depend on the delay.

Perhaps the scene where Hamlet passes up the chance to kill the apparently praying Claudius illustrates best how the experienced detective can make his breakthrough by means of the naive observer's comment. A critic trying to solve the "problem" of Hamlet's delay, easily assumes that Shakespeare wrôte the scene mainly to give the audience an excuse for Hamlet's delay. The analysis could then proceed evaluatively: "How effective is the scene in giving the excuse?" Or, "Do we really believe Hamlet; and, if not, is he lying to the audience or just kidding himself?" The evaluative impulse can spoil the effect of the play. When I first saw Hamlet as a naive teenage boy, struggling with a fear of Hell, the scene had enormous power. Coming as it does after the exciting play scene, the black depth of Hamlet's hatred took my breath away. I had not stopped to wonder why Hamlet was delaying. Not having that question in mind, I never doubted Hamlet's sincerity. And for me the scene had the profound effect it must have had upon many naive playgoers in Shakespeare's contemporary audience--people who believed in Hell or at least had a vivid sense of what it meant to want to send someone there. Evaluation based on the problem of Hamlet's delay vastly attenuates the scene's power.

All this is not to say that the naive reader is a better interpreter of literature than the expert. My own naive response was a matter of singular good luck. Anyone who has taught freshmen or sophomores can recall the painful experience of confronting a student with an enthusiastic, but pathetically misguided interpretation of a poem or novel. (How do you disagree with the interpretation without squelching the enthusiasm?) In the detective story, the naive observer's remark provides the missing link that makes everything click in the hero-detective's head. But it still requires the detective to solve the mystery. He says something like, "That's it, Jimmy! You've got it! Now I see it all clearly. Thanks!" The naive Jimmy stammers, "What, what? What do you mean? I don't understand." But the hero has already rushed off to arrest the murderer and Jimmy tags along to find out what the solution is--so the reader can know too.

Inexperienced students sometimes illuminate literature by their pristine simplicity. But all too often their response is no more naive and free from expectations than the critics'. Rather they merely reflect the watered-down expectations of earlier teachers. Clearly, the critic has to be a good detective and also be his own naive observer. When he finds a discrepancy between what he expected and what he has found, the critic has to ask himself: What would a naive observer think of this? What, for instance, would a man from Mars, free from Earthling preconceptions, think?

The psychiatrist Eric Berne's concept of "Martian thinking" is useful here. "Martian" says Berne, "translates words into their true meanings according to their results, and judges people not according to their apparent intent, but from the 'final display.'"[1] To show how this works, Berne looks at the story of Little Red Riding Hood (henceforth LRRH) from the point of view of a Martian visitor.

The Martian's Reactions to the LRRH story

1. What kind of mother sends a little girl through a woods where there are wolves? There is no mention that LRRH was ever warned not to stop and talk to wolves. If grandmother is so helpless, why does mother leave her all by herself in a forest full of wolves? No mother is that stupid. She either does not care much what happens to her daughter or maybe even wants to get rid of her.

2. After talking to the wolf, any straight-thinking girl would have said to herself, "That son of a bitch is going to eat up my grandmother if I don't get help fast." So why does LRRH dally around picking flowers?

3. The wolf is obviously overreaching himself by eating people instead of rabbits and such. He must know it will get him into trouble sooner or later. He evidently read Nietzsche or someone similar in his youth and lives by the motto "Live dangerously and die gloriously," a loser script.

4. No little girl is that stupid either. How could she look at the wolf's ears, eyes, teeth and paws and still think it was her grandmother? Why didn't she get out of there as fast as she could? In fact, she told him exactly where he could meet her again endangering her grandmother, and now she even climbs into bed with him.

5. The hunter is obviously a rescuer who enjoys working over his vanquished opponents with sweet little maidens to help--nothing particularly praiseworthy here.

6. What a mean little thing LRRH is, gathering up stones to put in the wolf's belly.

Berne was aware that all this seems amazing and far fetched, but people often act destructively in patterns like his version depicts. And all the while, they lie, delude themselves, remain culpably ignorant of the effects of their actions (if not of their real motives). Berne proposes Martian thinking as a partial solution to this problem. This involves a careful re-examination just as the detective must carefully re-examine the facts for the implications he has missed. And a little Martian thinking cuts through to the heart of many standard critical expectations.

Let us start with the evaluative distinction between Romantic and realistic fiction. A character in George Orwell's Burmese Days holds a girl in his arms planning to ask her to marry him. He even says, "Answer me this. Will you ---."[2] At that moment there is, of all things, an earthquake! Later that evening the girl (who had intended to say yes) finds out something about the hero that turns her against him; and a hundred pages later he commits suicide. Critics taking an evaluation stand condemn such events. Such things do not really happen, critics say; and if they occur in otherwise realistic works they spoil them. We demand that a writer either make events happen from an internal logic, or else make it clear that he is not trying to represent the way things really happen.

This is a common precept among critics. But it has angered authors. Dickens, in particular, resented this approach. The whole second half of Bleak House revolves around Krook's death and the destruction of his evidence by "spontaneous combustion." Dickens attacked published statements that this was unrealistic. And in his preface to the first bookform edition of Bleak House he said, "I have no need to observe that I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject." He lists a number of "spontaneous combustions" but essentially contents himself "with observing, that I shall not abandon the facts until there shall have been a considerable Spontaneous Combustion of the testimony on which human occurances are usually received."[3]

For Dickens coincidence is the way of life—of reality. Our subjective wish that things happen for a reason makes us demand that fiction show a logical reason for events. However, in life, conscious control of events is by far the exception rather than the rule. Inspector Bucket, the masterfully portrayed detective in Dickens' Bleak House, operates by the simple procedure of making himself ubiquitously present and waiting for the truth to come out. In Our Mutual Friend, Dickens dooms to failure Bradly Headstone's attempts to cover his crime.

> And this is another spell against which the shedder of blood for ever strives in vain. There are fifty doors by which discovery may enter. With infinite pains and cunning he double locks and bars forty-nine of them, and cannot see the fiftieth standing wide open.[4]

In the same novel, a chance meeting reveals the hero's secret identity. And the hero comments, ". . . chance has brought us face to face at last—which is not to be wondered at, for the wonder is, that, in spite of all my pains to the contrary, chance has not confronted us together sooner."[5]

Dickens' bit of Martian thinking effectively counters the notion that fiction full of coincidences is somehow less realistic or more escapist than fiction which shows us an internally logical cause for every action. In fact people have little desire for fiction to be just like reality. Instead they want it to provide a comfortable sense that there are indeed reasons behind the chaotic way things happen. And it is probably one of fiction's main contributions to social cohesion that it provides this reassurance. Shakespeare makes this very clear in Hamlet.

As the prince dies he reflects on the social chaos his actions have caused and says to Horatio: "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story." (Act V, sc. II, ll. 359-60) Moments after Hamlet's death Horatio orders the bodies "high on a stage be placed to view; / And let me speak to the yet unknowing world / How these things came about." (ll. 398-91) Hamlet had a personal reason for wanting the circumstances of his actions known. But Horatio immediately thinks of the social aspect. He says, "But let this same be presently perform'd, / Even while men's minds are wild; lest more mischance / On plots and errors happen." (ll. 405-07) Thus Horatio hopes performing Hamlet's story as a play (and how better than by performing Shakespeare's play?), will calm men's wild minds and bring social order from the chaos. The implication is that if only we can reassure ourselves that the chaotic actions have logical causes—in this case, "accidental judgments," "casual slaughters," and "purposes mistook"—we can help restore social order. Horatio sees the play as helping to do this.

One of literature's main functions is its contribution to social cohesion. Where then does this leave the critic? The detective also contributes to social cohesion. As long as the criminal is at-large we are all threatened. The detective's role is not to make moral judgments. His job is to find out the facts. And straight thinking demands that some analogous role be assigned to the critic. A vast amount of criticism (and things written about criticism) assumes that the critic's job is to decide what is good and what is bad literature--and pass this on to the less enlightened segment of the citizenry. Most critics do not seem to be bothered that the citizenry peacefully ignore their advice; and while the general public continues to read what it likes, the critics give their advice to the small segment of the population they hold captive in their classes. People are probably quite right in ignoring the critic's value judgments. Making aesthetic value judgments is no more the natural job of the critic than making moral judgments is of the detective. If he is at all analogous to the detective, the critic is supposed to find out what is going on in a work and make that knowledge available to anyone who wants to use it to further his enjoyment.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Eric Berne, What Do You Say After You Say Hello?, Grove Press (New York: n.d.), p. 101. The Martian's Reactions are paraphrased.

[2] George Orwell, Burmese Days, New American Library (New York: 1934, 1962), p. 154.

[3] Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Doubleday (Garden City, New York: 1953), p. xxviii.

[4] _______________, Our Mutual Friend, Dodd, Mead (New York: 1951), p. 231.

[5] _______________, Our Mutual Friend, Dodd, Mead (New York: 1951), p. 284.