

ripping the text apart at different seams

Varol Akman

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.

Ezra Pound

Literary criticism is a distinctive activity of the civilized mind.

T. S. Eliot

Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.

D. H. Lawrence

I read Simon's "Literary Criticism: A Cognitive Approach" three or four times and each time found a gem that I somehow failed to notice in some prior reading. This is clearly a paper of vision, depth, and richness, to which I cannot possibly do justice in a brief commentary such as the present one. I must state that I am especially impressed by the freshness of Simon's presentation and his penetrating examples from great literature (Camus, Proust, Stendhal), which are invariably fitting and give extensive vitality to his cognitive presentation.

Still, I have some reservations. First, an objection which has more to do with style: the paper is somewhat distracting. Simon's writing cannot easily be regarded as the most structured and concentrated form of expression. Repetitions abound and there are some pedantic passages that contribute little to the overall theme of the paper. I would especially like to single out two sections, titled "The Evidence for the Processes" and "Liberal Education and the Canon," as excess baggage. [1]

More importantly, I have been disappointed by Simon's insufficient regard for other pioneering studies on what may be broadly classified as "Literature and Cognition." True, Simon cites (albeit in a footnote) the ground-breaking work of Hobbs (1990) with the same title and praises it. However--and this is not easy to believe--he seems to be totally unaware of other important works that are equally relevant and that I would like to "uncover" now.

Searle (1979) makes excellent observations about how the author of a literary work creates a fictional world, say, the world of a novel. He makes a distinction between a work of fiction and fictional discourse and states, "Almost any important work of fiction conveys a 'message' or 'messages' which are conveyed by the text but are not in the text." He asks the question, "[W]hy do we attach such importance and effort to texts which contain largely pretended speech acts?" and notes that the crucial role that imagination plays in human life may provide an answer (74).

Tsur (1992) introduces the umbrella term "Cognitive Poetics" as the study of literature, employing the tools offered by cognitive science. Cognitive poetics explores the possible contributions of cognitive science to literary language and form. It offers cognitive theories that systematically account for the relationship between literary texts and their perceived effects. A partial glance at the table of contents of Tsur's book ("Poetic Structure and Perceived Qualities," "Poetry and Altered States of Consciousness," "The Critic's Mental Dictionary," and so on) does prove--at least to me--that Simon would find here invaluable motivation and, above all, a gold mine of themes concurring with his.

Another of Simon's omissions, which I find harder to forgive, is Barwise's (1989) fundamental paper on "Meaning and Content." Written at the invitation of Umberto Eco, it attempts, within the unifying framework of situation semantics (Barwise and Perry, 1983), to clarify assorted issues of interpretation that are currently researched by literary theorists. Barwise correctly asserts that the main goal of literary criticism is to analyze the meaning of a literary work and to study the relation of the reader or of the author to a literary work. In fact, all critical discourse can be seen as comprising one or more parts of the following trio: author, literary work, and reader. The critic tries to recapture what the author created while assuming that the author's creative process finds its roots in his intentions. Barwise notes that the original intention and the "achieved" intention may not coincide. During the creative process, what the author is trying to do is intentional. However, once the work is created then we have something actual, so the critic should talk about the effect which the work aims to evoke, the principles organizing the work into a whole, the meaning which the work suggests, etc.

Barwise has an especially pleasing abstract equation--echoed in Hobbs, (1990) in a somewhat modified form--of the relation between meaning and content. I prefer this terse formulation of Barwise's to the verbose explanations in Simon's paper:

$$CR(S,c) = P$$

Here, R is the conventions of the language, c is the circumstances shared by the speaker and listener (read the author and the reader), and P is the propositional content the speaker wants to convey. The speaker's task is to find an expression S that satisfies this basic equation. The task for the listener, on the other hand, is given R, c, and S to determine P. All the four parameters in the equation are at the speaker's disposal. He can play with them, as long as the equation is satisfied. (Obviously, if he experiments with R--a fitting example would be *Finnegans Wake*--he has less chance of being understood.) Thus, the reader of a literary text S is faced with one equation in

three unknowns: R, c, and P. Usually, the solution is not unique. The task of literary interpretation is then to use the available information about the unknowns (e.g., biographical material, information about the culture in which the writing took place, etc.) to circumscribe the range of their possible values.

To exemplify the elegance of Barwise's approach, consider the well-known poem of Craig Raine (1979), *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*, which opens^[2] with the following lines:

*Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
and some are treasured for their markings--
they cause the eyes to melt
or the body to shriek without pain.
I have never seen one fly, but
sometimes they perch on the hand.*

Much ink has been spilled to interpret this poem. Among the orthodox interpretations of the poem-taken from the backcover of Raine's book-are "[a] uniquely innocent eye presents an odd and beautiful version of the earth, while glimpsing, almost accidentally, the sad variety of human experience," and "[h]e [Raine] has set himself the mammoth task of visual retrieval, forcing us to see for the first time things we have been looking at all our lives." Similarly, Morrison and Motion (1982, 18) state that this is "a poem in which the familiar world is seen through the eyes of a fascinated alien." They then go on to declare that:

[I]f a poem draws a line around an incident or area of experience, observations which fall within its circumference seek each other out and establish relationships. Though such connections and relationships are artfully arranged, it would be wrong to think that the Martians' ingenuity prevents them from expressing emotion: their way of looking is also a way of feeling.

Some critics find here traces of a craving for a more innocent, cleansed version of the world to be at home in. The poet is totally outside the society he observes and "reads" things from a position of exile. The ordinary (commonsense) world is twisted by radical uses of metaphor and simile. The performance is highly self-conscious in its desire to undermine or revise the received opinion about the world. *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* imagines how the most familiar elements of our lives might seem to an alien. Everyday objects are described in an unusual, often striking manner, as if being seen for the first time by the alien visiting earth. The poet attempts to write from a position of innocence. For instance, it has been noted that in the source of the so-called Martian School's (Christopher Reid is another influential member) preoccupation with children is the belief that children see things with wonder and innocence.

Finally, the following passage-originally written to explain a totally different idea-would easily provide another equally beautiful interpretation of this poem (Barwise and Perry, p. 11):

We might imagine a Martian visiting Earth for the weekend, with perceptual abilities, needs, and capacities for action quite distinct from our own. The Martian would still inhabit the same reality we do, but might have a hard time understanding how or why we humans do the things we do. It might have a hard time, that is, if it noticed us at all. The Martian might, in effect, rip reality apart at entirely different seams, seams that we would not recognize, and vice versa.

What is good to know is that Barwise's equation can afford and justify each of these interpretations. What we have as a result is a rich collection of interpretations. I think that Simon has precisely this in mind when he writes, "[i]n the kind of writing we call 'literature,' possibly in contrast to 'scientific' writing, the creation of ambiguity rather than its elimination may be a major target of the writer's efforts."



Notes

1. To quote Pound (1951, p. 38): "[M]odern galleries lay great stress on 'good hanging', that is, of putting important pictures where they can be well seen, and where the eye will not be confused, or the feet wearied by searching for the masterpiece on a vast expanse..."
2. For copyright reasons, I shy away from quoting the remainder of this poem. Unfortunately, a longer excerpt would help the reader better to appreciate the paragraphs to follow.