

Oliver Bock

The Psychology of the Individual Reading for Pleasure

- Norman N. Holland, *Literature and the Brain*. Gainesville, FL: The PsyArt Foundation 2009. viii, 457 p. [Price: EUR 33,99]. ISBN: 978-0578018393. Also available online: <http://www.literatureandthebrain.com> [Price: \$ 9,95].

In the fast-growing field of studies concerning the relation of fictional literature and the workings of the human brain, Norman Holland's book surely stands out. In it, he proposes to examine the relationship between artistic achievement and the neurologic make-up of the human brain. The key perspective he adopts for this purpose is neuropsychanalysis. *Literature and the Brain* bears testimony to the author's long-standing occupation with reception theory. Particularly the influence of his earlier publication *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (first published 1968) can be noticed especially in the first half of his latest book. The application of psychoanalysis to the modes of reception of literary works, based in Holland's earlier work on the then-current analytic theories, is supplemented or updated here with recent developments and empirical results of the cognitive sciences to newly stress the activity of individual readers in the effort to make sense of a literary text.

Holland advances his comprehensive analysis through four distinct parts in his book. The first three chapters, if read together with the appendix on the human brain, serve as an introduction to the basic physiology of the brain and the finer points of neuropsychanalysis. This overarching approach tries to relate traditional psychoanalytic concepts to neurological and cognitive findings about the workings of the human brain. The second part of *Literature and the Brain*, comprising eight chapters, introduces several key phenomena Holland observes as literature's effects upon readers, such as momentary belief in the fictitious or the generation of emotions towards fictional characters. The third part moves the argument closer to fictional literature, dealing with concepts such as form, content, style, and meaning. The fourth and final part is concerned with the aptly named »Big Questions« and aims to provide a synthesis of Holland's arguments. Ultimately, Holland strives to arrive at two major conclusions. First, he wants to show that every reaction to a literary work depends solely upon the individual mind, an aim which is at variance with cognitive theory in general. Second, in contrast to other writers in the field of cognitive literary studies, Holland insists that the major force behind consuming literature is a search for pleasure.

After the preliminaries of the first part, Holland begins to set his course towards an individualistic conception of literary reception in the second part of his work. This conception is based foremost on the ontological status of literary texts as a reader-constructed experience. For the description of this phenomenon Holland introduces three constitutive aspects of a reader's experience: reduced awareness of surroundings or the own body, the suspension of disbelief, and the development of emotions towards fictional characters. It is at this point where at least a short comment on the identity of the often invoked ›we‹ in Holland's reference to the experience of readers would have been most welcome, that is, there is a distinction necessary between the ›professional‹ from the ›common‹ reader for the purpose of Holland's argument. Unfortunately this distinction appears in the book only much later (cf. 267). As every ›professional‹ reader would agree, any or all of the just-mentioned aspects may be absent during the reading of a fictional text for professional purposes such as in literary criticism or the preparation of a seminar session.

Each of the identified aspects is accounted for in psychoanalytic terms, such as the concept of ›flow‹ as an explanation for the experience of decreased attention to surroundings or body, which is, as Holland points out, not unique to the process of reading. Rather, it may be encountered in many everyday-life situations, most often in the forms of habituation or a shifting focus of attention. More peculiar to literature are the remaining two facets of reading, the absence of doubt regarding the possible truth of whatever is represented in a fictional work, and the arousal of emotions in reaction to represented imaginary characters or events. In both instances, Holland treads on familiar ground. He relates the withholding of a reality check to Coleridge's ›willing suspension of disbelief‹ and to the evolutionary understanding of the distinction between the real and the unreal as advantageous. Ultimately, the reality status of fiction becomes unimportant, because reading a text triggers no impulse to act within the reader's world upon whatever is represented in a literary work. Finally, the development of emotions in reaction to literature is treated at considerable length in the remainder of the second part of the book. A careful examination of the psychological aspects of emotions brings Holland into close contact with the latest hypotheses on empathy and identification (e.g. the possible existence of mirror neurons as a biological foundation of empathy), assigning literature the role of a stimulator for emotions.

The third part of Holland's book brings his discussion closer to literature itself. Based on the fundamental effects on readers discussed before, the next chapters move on to detail how literature fulfils these functions. The introduction of the dichotomy of form and content, obsolete by now in other literary theories, but vital for Holland in his stress on the individual's process of reception as a function of individual mechanisms to appraise (in the form of internalised psychological ›defences‹) formal elements in the design of a literary work, leads him on to the specific functions of the actual content of texts. The following discussion of three distinct models regarding the possible functions of content (cf. ch. 15) brings Holland in close contact with the theorists of *Rezeptionsästhetik* (which, sadly, is constantly misspelled; in this and other instances the book would have profited from close copy-editing). Regarding the role of content within the process of reception, Holland favours a ›reader-active‹ model which situates all formations of meaning on the side of the reader, whose already formed hypotheses about texts, be they basic, such as how individual printed letters form words, or sophisticated, such as expectations about the content or stylistic make-up of a particular author's text, receive forms of feedback from the text and are modified accordingly. This results in the creation of »the illusion that the ›content‹ is ›in‹ the literary work« (188). The applicability of this particular model hinges on a question Holland initially poses: Why does a text evoke similar interpretative reactions in all readers, while at the same time other aspects of the same text are the cause of disagreement regarding their ›content‹? In reference to this problem, a ›text-active‹ model that bases the potential of transfer solely on the text itself is rejected by Holland as inadequate because it could not account for the differences in interpretative reactions that a text is able to generate. On similar grounds a ›bi-active‹ model which would combine this with the efforts of the aforementioned reader-centred scheme is equally ruled out, because even though the active role of a reader is a part of it, the deficiencies of the ›text-active‹ model are present as well. Why Holland argues in favour of a ›reader-active‹ model will become clearer in the following discussion on the importance of individual identity schemes for the process of reception. However, for a ›professional‹ reader it seems difficult to accept the radical implications of this model, particularly in relation to artistic or aesthetic achievements in a text. These may well be appreciated regardless of personal preferences.

Most of the remainder of the book's third part is devoted to bringing the reader-active model in line with current neurological and psychoanalytic thought on the processing of language in the brain. In order to account for the similarities and differences in textual interpretation, Hol-

land draws up a synthesis of findings concerning the hierarchical perception of language in order to create an experience from literature. He combines these with existing paradigms of interpretation developed in reader-response criticism. *Literature and the Brain* distinguishes four different levels of processing (cf. 229–230) which are sorted according to an increasing significance of individuality: at the bottom, a physiological level enabling the senses to experience literature, next, a level dominated by general cultural knowledge shared among large groups of individuals, followed by a level best described in Stanley Fish's term as an ›interpretive community‹, which imposes certain patterns of interpretation upon a reader belonging to such a community, and finally, at the hierarchical top, a level constituted through a system of personal, individual memories and needs. Feedback loops interconnect these levels, whereby the lower levels enable the functionality of the higher ones. In this fashion, Holland constructs a mechanism of interpretation, where the individual needs (in the form of an identity scheme) reign supreme. These needs dominate the patterns of reception with an imperative to gratify whatever an individual seeks in a literary work in order to arrive at a ›meaning‹ and a meaningful interpretation (cf. 260). This ruling identity scheme is highly individual, but the overarching principle every such scheme strives for is an experience of pleasure. It goes almost without saying that this pleasure might also incorporate the enjoyment of the ugly or the evil (cf. ch. 20).

The final part of Holland's book is largely concerned with this concept of pleasure which he finds at the heart of a reader's propensity for fictional literature. He returns to the differentiation of common and professional reader, associating the latter with a response of intellection, and the former with a response of enjoyment. Pleasure, as a form of enjoyment, and the evaluation of literature according to the individual criteria for deriving pleasure, is distinct from an aesthetic or analytic judgement of a literary work, which is what a critic aims for. In contrast to a professional judgement of a text, which often tries to invoke a perspective to be adopted by others, the admiration of a literary work on the grounds of it being a source for pleasure is, as Holland tries to demonstrate throughout his book, an individualistic matter. The question of why this experience, despite this particular trait, still manages to attract a large following occupies the final chapters of Holland's study. The argument for pleasure foremost rests on the often postulated claim (uncontested in the book) of fictional literature being a universal phenomenon of human life, in spite of the individual character of enjoyment just described. It is in the penultimate chapter of *Literature and the Brain* where Norman Holland most strongly opposes the claims of divergent branches of theory on cognition and literature, in particular the application of evolutionary psychology to literature. He rejects the two explanations taken pretty much for granted in these applications. Neither, Holland argues, can the universality of literature be explained by a genetic disposition, which he dismisses as being tautological reasoning. Nor, despite the obvious inherent attraction to a professional dealing with literature, does Holland believe the argument about an enhanced interest in literature or narrative conferring evolutionary advantages to have a valid claim upon universality. The insistence on simple pleasure as the main reason for enjoying literature is at odds with the views of current Literary Darwinism and evolutionary psychology, because instead of the capacity for simulation (which, in the view of evolutionary psychology, constitutes an advantage) being fostered by narratives, Holland favours emotional stimulation as a means to achieve a pleasurable experience through a literary text. The brevity of Holland's engagement with the take of evolutionary psychology on literature is understandable enough in the light of his work being devoted exclusively to neuropsychanalysis. Still, the briefness certainly curtails the potential force of Holland's argument within the field of cognition and literature.

Holland moves through his topic with clarity despite the volume of his book and the comprehensiveness of the concepts and theories he draws on. Some chapters seem cut short though,

e.g. chapter eight on the particular intricacies of metafictional literature, roughly four pages long only, touches upon an interesting question surely worth a more extensive discussion or a reprisal of the topic after the initial early appearance within the book. This is one example where the impressive groundwork Holland supplies in *Literature and the Brain* shows the path for future research, which, in accordance with Holland's claims on the primacy of the individual, should necessarily be of an empirical nature. Whether, however, this further research will need to conform to the finer points of neuropsychanalysis or whether it should rather attempt a closer union with other developments regarding the relationship of literature and the human psyche remains to be seen.

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