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Exploring Literary Application

- Anders Pettersson, The Concept of Literary Application. Readers' Analogies from Text to Life. New York: Palgrave McMillan 2012. 250p. [EUR 64,61]. ISBN: 978-1-137-03541-7.

That readers of literature draw analogies from the content of texts to life is a well-known phenomenon. In literary theory, however, it also is rather neglected. Application, it is believed, is only an epiphenomenon without important connections to the core acts of understanding and appreciating the literary work. In his book *The Concept of Literary Application* (from here on: *Concept*), Anders Pettersson challenges this traditional picture by giving application an indispensable role in the reception process. He pursuits this interesting and appealing project with clarity and vigour.

Chapters 1-3 introduce the concept of literary application, chapters 4-6 discuss the relation of application to other operations by readers, chapters 7-11 try to prove the aesthetic relevance of application, and chapter 12 concludes the book with a summary and some afterthoughts.

Aims and Concepts

Pettersson understands application to be any process in which a reader »focuses on an element (x) in the text and relates it to an element or possible element (y) in the real world. Comparing x and y, the reader finds them compatible or incompatible. The comparison places something, y, in the real world in a new light, or perhaps it revives a perspective on y with which the reader was already familiar« (2) That is, application for Pettersson is largely identical with drawing analogies from texts to something else, consisting of the three steps »focusing, comparing, and evaluating« (1). Three points about Pettersson's take on the subject are remarkable.

Firstly, ›applying‹ is no success verb. Readers may, for example, find that their situation is quite different from the one described in a novel. As long as that comparison gives or revives a perspective on their situation (or even on their imaginings, beliefs and the like), Pettersson would say that application has taken place.

Secondly, due to his aversion to the work concept, Pettersson takes the text as the starting point of the comparisons, not the work, the fictional world, or some other choice. The text, however, includes »a fundamental layer of meaning […] which can be said to consist of the complex of representation […] to be made up by the surface structure, the textbase, the situation model with the point of view, and the discourse mode« (50). This is what Pettersson calls the »thin« text (129). For the moment notice that, judging by Pettersson's examples given in his book, the thin text is rather rich in content. Examples of starting points for application in the thin text include »a very dark outlook on life« (1), »aspects of fictional love relationships« (5), »images […] of happy requited love and of overall harmony« (5-6), »the speaker's attitude or state of mind« (7), or »wishes expressed in the poem« (29). I will come back to this point below in connection with the idea that application is aesthetically relevant.

Thirdly, Pettersson claims that application is, more often than not, an unconscious process (53-56). He is certainly correct in stating that reading involves many unconscious processes, of

which application might be one. But in a way, this also means putting application out of reach of literary theorists. It is a more or less open question which online processes actually take place during reading, and if application is unconscious, steps such as focussing, comparing and evaluating are but a guessed reconstruction of the real processes. Again, I will come back to this point below.

Pettersson acknowledges the need to distinguish unconscious comparisons which occur »in order to arrive at a situation model« (53) from (although also unconscious) application, since »[a]pplication is concerned not with textual understanding, but with the creation of personal relevance from a text whose objective meaning is already understood« (100). Without giving any argument for it, he seems to think that in both cases essentially the same mechanism is at work. However, we already established that our talk about unconscious application is but a reconstruction of the actual mental processes. Whether there really are one or more mechanisms at work is actually an open question.

Pettersson is interested in the empirical question of what readers actually do with a text. Consequently, he draws on a wide variety of empirical studies about application. *Concept*, however, is not a metastudy presenting an overview of empirical research on the subject. Although Pettersson quotes from empirical studies and rests some of his arguments on them, he mostly uses only extracts from the studies, namely »direct quotation[s] from a participant« (25), in order to show that and how these readers draw analogies from texts. While there is nothing wrong per se with quoting single data points from empirical studies, such anecdotal evidence surely cannot claim to carry the epistemic force of a well-conducted empirical study – it is not relying on scientific, empirical methods. Pettersson at least misses an opportunity by not commenting explicitly on the different uses he makes of empirical studies, especially since he criticizes other accounts for not paying enough attention to empirical findings (chapters 7 to 11 esp. 171-181) and not explaining clearly enough where on the issue of empirical evidence they stand. Since Pettersson is clearly aware of the many problems concerning the relation of literary theory and empirical studies, one would expect explicit discussion of these problems. Unfortunately, he remains largely silent on the subject.

Pettersson's claims about literary application come in various strengths. Certainly, readers of literature draw analogies from texts. Call this the trivial thesis. It is less clear that »application plays a strategic part in the reading of literature for pleasure and artistic satisfaction« (9) or that »understanding of application can illuminate many aspects of literary communication, including the cognitive significance of literature and such phenomena as empathy and identification (9). Call these the aesthetic importance and illumination-theses respectively.

Apart from these main goals, Pettersson also pursues much more global ones. He is clearly dissatisfied with many literary theories, and criticizes them with wit and verve. I won't be concerned with these arguments here, although they definitely contribute to the richness of *Concept*. Instead I concentrate only on Pettersson's two main claims on illumination and aesthetic importance.

The illumination thesis

Over the course of the first six chapters, Pettersson argues extensively that application does exist and cannot be explained away by other effects like transportation, immersion, the representational function of the text, or the cognitive value of the text. Especially in chapters 4-6 this often draws readers' attention away from Pettersson's other main concern, namely arguing that

immersion, empathy, and learning from literature essentially rest on application. I will comment on two such arguments.

Concerning cognitive enrichment, Pettersson argues in chapter 4 that in reading literature certain elements come together that promote the rise of »fresh thoughts about personally important aspects of the real world« (69). While Pettersson's ideas are original and interesting, they do not contribute to the more specified questions if we can use fiction to justify beliefs, or if it can help avoiding prejudice and error. He certainly has not shown that »you will, in practice, have to apply literature to life if you are to obtain knowledge of the real world from reading literature« (175), which would mean showing how application is relevant for epistemic justification. Regarding the wider concept of cognitive enrichment, Pettersson is happy with insinuating that application gives us »opportunities to think about life« or »new perspectives on what is important and worth striving for« (69), without giving any details. How reliable is application? How can unconscious application contribute to conscious processes like thinking about one's own life? Insofar as these and other questions remain unaddressed, the claim that thinking about application illuminates cognitive enrichment remains an unfulfilled promise.

Regarding empathy, Pettersson basically sees the same mechanism at the heart of it as in application. »What is normally referred to as empathy is the correspondence between our own feelings$_R$ (or imagined feelings$_R$) and the feelings$_F$ that we imaginatively ascribe to the fictional characters« (100). This, of course, is not application itself, since it is concerned with constructing a situation model, which is part of the (thin) text, and which has to be understood before analogies can be drawn from the text. Empathy, though, is not restricted to the basic level of understanding the text. It might come in at the level of »creating personal relevance« (100). Only in these cases does Pettersson claim that »what is called empathy is in fact sometimes feelings based on application« (101). However, while these ideas are interesting, they are empirical theses about the (mostly unconscious) processes going on in readers. Whether the actual processes are as Pettersson imagines them to be, and whether therefore application indeed can illuminate some cases of empathy, remains to be seen.

Pettersson claims that »[a]pplication theory […] offers a straightforward and concrete explanation of how the literary object means on the ›secondary‹ level that supervenes on ordinary linguistic meaning. Readers' acts of application associate literary objects with a whole range of ideas and, since different readers may perform different applications, these ideas, taken collectively, are ›not distinctly determined‹.« (141-142) However, Pettersson never goes into the details of such an account. The question, under which conditions application can indeed lead to what he calls wider, or secondary, meaning, remains open.

The aesthetic relevance of application

There is an obvious problem for any account which takes application to be aesthetically relevant. When we speak of something being aesthetically relevant we typically mean being relevant to appreciating the work. We mean that there are features of the work that are aesthetically pleasing. And it seems that application has nothing to do with this part of literary experience. If I understand Pettersson correctly, he challenges this picture in two ways. Firstly, he claims that what looks like aesthetic appreciation might in fact be appreciation of (unconscious) application. Secondly, he denies that aesthetic appreciation is restricted to appreciating features of a literary work.

Concerning the first challenge, Pettersson takes the proponent of aesthetic relevance to hold that it is »a simple fact of experience that we react to a text, when we read it as literature, with

an enjoyment that has nothing to do with its relationship to anything outside the qualities of the text itself. That proposed fact, however, is something that I would deny.« (131) What we take to be aesthetic appreciation, he claims, might as well be enjoyment that has other causes, maybe even (unconscious) application: »[u]nconscious application could in fact be a crucial factor behind what adherents of the aesthetic approach would call the aesthetic experience of literature.« (132) However, as correct as Pettersson is in reminding us that appearances can be deceiving, such a reminder by itself does not constitute any reason to prefer Pettersson's account. Since appearances do not point to a relevant, unconscious application element in aesthetic appreciation, it seems that the burden of proof is on Pettersson. One would have to show empirically that unconscious application is indeed a causal factor contributing to aesthetic appreciation. Such a study would also have to rule out basic correspondences which happen on the level of what Pettersson calls the thin text, since those do not constitute applications proper (that presuppose the thin text).

There is a sense in which the second challenge is just a truism: We can acknowledge that we might be aesthetically pleased with analogies we are able to draw (consciously) from literary works. There is, however, a more sophisticated way of spelling out aesthetic relevance. Literary works can be used and are used in all sorts of ways. But some of those uses are special – literary works are, as many theorists maintain, *designed* to be used in certain ways, be it as props in games of make-believe, as aesthetically pleasing objects, etc. It seems to me that most theorists concerned with the aesthetic role of literary works have in mind an aesthetic role which is authorized by the work, by the author, or by the conventions of literary practice. Arguably, most literary works are not designed in order to aesthetically appreciate applications, and (the possibility of) application seems to have little influence on the appreciation of other elements like a rhyme scheme, fine irony, a detailed description of an interesting character, etc. Maybe one could show via empirical studies that being able to draw analogies from a concrete literary work is a necessary condition for being able to appreciate the work aesthetically. But, to my knowledge, such studies don't exist yet.

Pettersson attacks the idea that appreciation is concerned with objective features of a work by arguing against what he calls the textual supremacy thesis in two ways. Firstly, he argues that we should refrain from using the concept of a literary work. The idea goes back to his *The Ontology of Literary Works*.[1] Pettersson maintains that the work concept is essentially »metaphorical« (154) and »contradictory« (156), but I am not convinced. It is certainly true that everyday (theoretical) talk about literary works cannot always be taken at face value. However, it does not follow that the work concept is essentially flawed. Nevertheless, we can understand Pettersson as proposing a new view: try working without the concept of a literary work, and see if you arrive at better results and more conceptual clarity. This weaker program is certainly interesting.

Instead of the literary work, Pettersson talks about the (thin) text (including surface structure, textbase, situation model with point of view, and discourse mode) and what he calls wider meaning. Only the text is objective, everything else can vary from reader to reader. Additionally, Pettersson holds that there is no (thick) text which can be said to *contain* any meaning: »the text itself and its supposed content disappear« (156) Instead, the content of a work is constituted partly by inner meaning (constructed from the text by all competent and successful readers alike via surface structure, textbase, situation model with point of view, and discourse mode), and partly by subjective wider meaning which, at least partly, is generated by application. If we go along with this proposal, the argument against the aesthetic relevance of application needs to be reformulated, but it loses nothing of its appeal. Pettersson's opponents then hold that authors write in such a way, and the rules of literary discourse are such that competent

readers can objectively build the inner meaning. It is the thin text, which is meant to be aesthetically appreciated. Application typically is not relevant for this aesthetic appreciation of the thin text.

It is here that Pettersson's second argument comes in: »the text offers relatively little for the reader's aesthetic interest to focus on« (129) It is supposedly the wider meaning which readers find aesthetically pleasing. However, Pettersson does not argue for this claim apart from stating that the thin text is just too thin to be aesthetically interesting. There are at least three problems such an idea has to overcome: I noticed above that Pettersson's examples of application, which always start from the thin text, show a rather rich array of elements readers might focus on and which, one might add, readers can find aesthetically pleasing. Additionally, Pettersson consequently underestimates the role of shared conventions for interpreting texts. The objective meaning of a text might therefore be far richer than he thinks, allowing again for appreciation that is independent of the subjective, wider meaning. Finally, it seems to me that we need to distinguish between *aesthetic* appreciation and other types of appreciation. Certainly not any kind of appreciation in connection with literary works counts as aesthetic appreciation. We can, e.g., appreciate literary works for the role they play for our personal lives while finding them aesthetically lacking. Pettersson's opponents have a clear way of drawing the line: Only appreciation of the narrow meaning counts as aesthetic. It would be interesting to know if, and how, Pettersson intends to distinguish aesthetic appreciation from other types of appreciation.

Although, in the end, I am not convinced that application is aesthetically relevant, Pettersson certainly has given a rich and inviting account of literary application that can inspire many further studies. He invites us to take seriously the phenomenon of literary application, an invitation that hopefully will be accepted by many.

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Notes

1Anders Pettersson, The Ontology of Literary Works. Theoria 50 (1984), 36-51.