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Reading for peace? Literature as activism – an investigation into new literary ethics and the novel

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Abstract: Literary ethicists like Dorothy J Hale and narratologists like James Phelan have argued that the reading process makes literary novels worthy of ethical investigation. That is, it's not just a book's content – which may debate norms and values – but the *process of reading* that inspires the reader to consider Other points of view. This alterity, new ethicists argue, can lead to increased empathy and thus more thoughtful decision-making within the 'actual' world. In fact, Hale (2007: 189) says empathetic literary training is a 'pre-condition for positive social change'. This may work well theoretically, but what practical issues does it hold for social activists? How useful can literature actually be in the face of dire social issues? Can we 'read' our way out of poverty and aggressive military intervention? And what would it mean to develop an activism based on reading and empathy? This paper will examine these questions using a framework based on the work of Hale and Phelan. (Hale, 2007)

Keywords: literary ethics, social activism, reading, writing

Introduction

The devout reader is selfish, they care nothing about what's taking place outside the book that's gaping open in front of them. They'll lose sleep without considering how tired they'll be the next morning. They'll fob off friends and family. They'll commit to their imagination before they'll commit to their own world. So how can literature lead us to activism and indeed peace-based social change?

There's little argument about the importance of literacy for activating social change. Paulo Freire argued passionately for that in his ground-breaking text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. But that seems fairly straightforward. After all, literacy is critical for engagement and engagement is one of the cornerstones of political activism, especially on a grassroots level. The new literary ethicists are interested in the specific use of the literary, not literacy (though literacy is obviously a prerequisite for the literary), and the literary's effects on the ethical. That is, how can reading novels affect our capacity for empathy and thus, our capacity for social change?

Considering the self-involved nature of reading – reader and text – this may seem preposterous to political activists. Indeed, I was deemed a political traitor in my family when I decided to major in English instead of Spanish and International Studies at university. My sister was living and working in war zones in Latin America, driving ambulances and escorting union leaders who'd received death threats. I wanted to read Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, a somewhat romantic version of warfare. Though this raised questions for me in terms of the ethical position of an author who writes about war with language that is beautiful, it was hardly the same thing as going into hiding in San Salvador when the FMLN was battling for the capital.

The issue here is whether or not we can use the literary as a vehicle for social change. The new literary ethicists certainly think so. Gayatri Spivak links literary reading and ethics when she writes: 'If he (Paul Wolfowitz) had had serious training in literary reading and/or the imagining of the enemy as human, his position on Iraq would not be so inflexible (2002: 23)." The inference here (as Dorothy J Hale notes) is that English majors have an ethical edge over political science majors and Wolfowitz (and indeed Iraq) would have benefited from his literary training. First I'll explore how new literary ethics reach that conclusion, and then I'll look at the practicalities of this: that is, how – or indeed, if – we, as social and peace activists activists, can use this to advantage.

Overview of new literary ethics

James Phelan and Dorothy J Hale are two of the leading theorists in new literary ethics, however the field dates back to Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Later work by Martha Nussbaum (1983, 1986 and 1990) and J Hillis Miller (1987) strengthened the field, despite a tepid response from structuralists. The idea of an ethics of representation suffered under structuralism (the fictional character as ethical conduit was seen as romantic, if not naïve), however poststructuralists have proved keen to chart this territory, including Geoffrey Harpham (using post-structural theory), Judith Butler (using gender studies and psychoanalytic theory) and Gayatri Spivak (using Derrida's theoretical work and the post-colonial) (Cosgrove, 2007: 1).

New literary ethics are founded on the idea that ethical choices are integral to both the reading and writing processes. Despite the prominence of reader-response theory, considerable attention is often paid to the text as ethical construction and the author as constructor. That is, the author must choose what stories to tell, what settings to use, which characters to represent, and how to do so. Obviously, there are choices to make and those choices are ethical. Whose stories get told and what 'realities' get represented are packed with political and ethical decisions (here I think of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* responding to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*). However, new literary ethicists would argue there is also an ethics of reading that takes place. As Phelan (1996: 262) writes: "the ethics of reading involves some dialogic relation between the reader's values and those of the text." So that emphasis can be placed on reader engagement with the ethical offerings of a text. Any novel with plot points and characters (that is, things happening to 'people') is going to involve some level of ethical engagement as readers question or support the actions and decisions made within the text. It is inevitable that there will be moments of collusion and moments of discrepancy between the reader's values and those represented within the text. And here I emphasise that I'm specifically concerned with the literary as opposed to genre fiction. Within this context, the literary must A) engage with the human condition; B) be multi-layered (ie symbolism and metaphor must be present); and C) operate with interrelation between form and content. (For a deeper discussion of this, see Cosgrove 2007: 2)

However, literary ethicists are concerned with more than the response of a reader to the values of a particular text. As Hale notes (2007: 189), there is a difference between looking at the ethical value of novels and the ethical value of 'the novel'. And critical to this idea of the 'ethical novel' is how it supports reader engagement with the Other. That is, novels offer textual access to other points-of-view, other headspaces. Indeed, this is something authors frequently play on within individual texts – for instance, the multiple points-of-view in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* or Winterson's *The Passion*. These narratives are unsettling because the idea of a unified, consistent textual reality is questioned by opposing narratives. However, I

would argue that any work of literary fiction can be unsettling, whether or not it uses multiple points of view, because it offers readers access to a world not their own. The text itself is the opposing narrative. The 'unified' consistent reality under question is the reader's.

However the reader is not a blind vessel that voraciously consumes whatever it is given to read. The reader must decide if he/she will engage with the stories, the points-of-view, on offer. As Hale (2007: 189) writes:

> to open a novel is to open oneself to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical. For the new ethicists, the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels: Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the novel reader into a transactional relation with another agent, an agent defined by its Otherness from the reader.

I take this to mean that the reader must decide if she will agree to read the novel on offer. That is, she must decide if she will 'believe' the story, and in so doing, submit to the Otherness of a different point-of-view than her own. And, for the duration of reading, forget herself in favour of another. The reader's shopping list or work stress must be put aside if she is to engage with the 'reality' of the novel. This foregrounding of a Self, different from that of the reader, is a poignant point for those interested in social activism.

> This alterity, or access to otherness, is the basis of the new literary ethicist arguments: that empathy and thus more thoughtful decision-making come from 'submitting' to an othered position – that is the characters, the points of view on offer within the text (Cosgrove, 2007).

Hale (2007: 189) says empathetic literary training is a 'pre-condition for positive social change'. While I see connections between literary reading, empathy and social change, I'm wary of the idea that social change is inevitably connected to the literary for the simple reason that this would mean those unable to read would be unable to enact positive social change. This also implies that positive social change was born with the novel. One of the difficulties in positing an activism based on reading and writing is the undeniable issue of class – that is, who has a room of one's own where he/she can read/write? This line of thought can lead us to the ludicrous conclusion that those with material means are 'better' social activists because of their access to reading and writing. Obviously this is problematic and issues of class are undeniable, however I don't think we should dismiss the connections between reading, empathy and social change.

Is literary reading always going to work towards the greater good? This generalisation seems fraught (I think here of Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*) but Pavel (2000: 532) states: "all fiction and poetry insofar as they provide, to use Aristotle's expression, the imitation of an action, significantly contribute to normative inquiry, controversy, and interpretation." If we consider the greater good to be one where normative inquiry, controversy and interpretation are encouraged, then yes, all literary reading will work towards the greater good. And certainly *American Psycho* gave attention to the novel as a site for normative inquiry, controversy and interpretation. However some theorists disagree. As Hale notes (2007: 188), D.A. Miller sees the novel as an instrument of normativity and Nancy Armstrong sees the novel as something that projects an idea of the "universalised 'individual subject'". That is, Miller sees the novel as something that informs subjects of normative values and supports their continuation and Armstrong is wary of the individualised sense of self that is projected via the novel. While these concerns are valid, I think it's important that we don't overlook the possible ways we can use literary ethics within the practical realm of activating

human rights and peace. That is, theory is critical as long as it can bridge practice, harking back to Freire's notion of praxis.

Practical issues for a social/pacifist activism based on empathetic reading

But how useful can literature actually be in the face of dire social issues? Can we 'read' our way out of poverty and aggressive military intervention? George W Bush is married to a former librarian so perhaps the case isn't looking good for literary ethicists. Do we all write books with multiple points-of-view with the aim of establishing sites of complex ethical enquiry? Or is an ethics of literature inevitable because of the "multiple kinds of ethical engagements that texts make possible" (Phelan 1996: 262). One of the difficulties with an activism based on literary ethics is that empathetic reading is not a quantifiable thing. At what point are we trained in literary empathy? How many books would it take to make an 'empathetic reader'? And are we talking canonical texts or counter-canonical ones? If you skimmed part of *Moby Dick* are you less empathetic than someone who read each whaling section twice? The situation becomes ridiculous.

Hale (2007: 189) states that there is a difference in examining the ethical value of literature and putting forward an ethical theory of the literary novel. That is, an ethical theory of the novel is interested in the role of reading as opposed to the ways that specific novels have affected specific social contexts. However, there's little doubt that reading and writing are potent processes for activists to consider. Imagine what the United States might be like if Harriet Beecher Stowe had never written *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Think of a western literary world without Ralph Ellison, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Fyodor Dostoevsky or Charles Dickens and it seems obvious that literature affects the world. Though pinning down what, exactly, that affect is, proves a tricky business. Dickens's work and social problem literature, in particular, were "predicated on the assumption that readerly emotion would lead to ethical behaviours. If readers cried for fictional suffering, Dickens and many of his contemporaries believed, then they would try to ameliorate the actual suffering they encountered around them. (Harrison, 2008, 262). Some theorists like Suzanne Keen (2006, 1997) are sceptical of the idea that the feeling responses that novels trigger are necessarily ethical. Others like Nussbaum (1997, 1995, 1990) argue that novel-reading has the potential to make us better, more empathetic citizens (for a thorough overview, see Harrison, 2008). Mark Vonnegut (2008: 6) weighs in on the side of literature as affective:

> Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are, that you are alone, that no one has ever felt the way you have. What occurs to people when they read Kurt is that things are much more up for grabs than they thought they were. The world is a slightly different place just because they read a damn book. Imagine that."

So if we assume that reading and writing can affect readers and writers, how can social and peace activists harness new literary ethics to advantage? Do we put reading on the political agenda in the general hope it will foster more empathetic thinking? It sounds vague but that's one strategy. Do we recommend more reading in Australian elementary and secondary schools? Again, that's a possibility to explore, however I think it's a heavy burden to expect schools to carry by themselves without external support. I work with English high school teachers in the Illawarra and they fret about the lack of enthusiasm that students show for reading. If we're going to advocate more reading in the school system, I would argue that we need to have government support for reading and the literary across the board. Maybe this is coming. In his first weeks in office, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd introduced two prizes of

$100,000 each for non-fiction book of the year and fiction book of the year. While I'm wary of prizes and the problematics of judging (what criteria are we to judge a 'book of the year' by?), this is one of the richest prizes in the world and sends a clear message that the literary is to be valued. Or does it? Within months of this prize being announced, the NSW writers centres have been under attack as the Ministry of the Arts reviews its funding (apparently state values aren't in step with our national ones). Hopefully our writers' centres will survive, but what guarantee do we have that increased reading will lead to increased empathy? I admit that I'm wary of a cultural rationalism based on economic rationalism. That is, unless it shows clear profit margins, it's not worth pursuing – unless we can quantify empathy, we shouldn't be bothered with it. Obviously it's not that simple.

Another issue that comes up with an empathetic activism based on reading is the question: is it more useful to campaign publicly or to leave our placards at home and snuggle up in front of the solar heater with a good book? Michael Eskin (2004: 561) says:

> … if this most recent resurgence of critical-philosophical interest in 'ethics and literature' is to be credited with innovative force and significance, these latter must perforce be of an iterable kind, consisting in revisiting, displacing, and (re)inscribing extant reflections on the ethical significance of literature and the interface between the two discursive genres in a language and key attuned to the philosophical, theoretical, cultural, and sociopolitical developments and challenges of the present and recent past.

I take this to mean that if this return to ethics and literature is to actually matter, we must revisit, displace and (re)inscribe our existing thoughts on the two genres of ethics and literature, taking into account the philosophical, theoretical, cultural and sociopolitical realities that we're facing (and of course, in order to do that, we have to take account of the past). That is, an ethics of literature cannot be considered separate from the world where writing and reading happens. So while reading can open readers to alternative points of view, training us in empathetic reasoning, it is not a final destination for activists. Perhaps we read and through that process become more empathetic, but that empathy must then translate into action/reactions in the world beyond the text: reading alone isn't the answer. Reading can lead to empathy but that empathy must then be employed in the philosophical, theoretical, cultural and sociopolitical realm beyond the text for it to constitute social action. This counters Mark Vonnegut's assertion that the world is a different place because someone reads a "damn book". However, I would argue the world is a different place after someone reads that book because of his or her concrete actions/reactions (whether conscious or not) that take place after reading the book.

Here I'm reminded again of Paulo Freire (1972: 28) and his discussions on praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a tool for liberation: "This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." That is, praxis is the combination of being critically engaged and acting upon that engagement. Reading the literary, reading the novel, provides a platform where reflection or critical engagement can take place. It gives readers impetus to consider other imaginings of the world and that is critical to praxis, however it does not operate alone as praxis. Reading provides a site for reflection and that must take place with action. I acknowledge this is an uneasy dichotomy. In keeping with Vonnegut's earlier assertion, an argument can be made for reading or reflection as action. However, I find this line of thought problematic when searching for effective, practical strategies for peace activists because one can read or 'reflect' to themselves as an insular process without committing to the next step of affecting change in the world. My argument here is that literary ethics offer a concrete place for Freire's reflection – the novel – but it must be partnered with action (even on the miniscule or unconscious level) for praxis to

take place. I find it interesting that in the years since Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, book clubs have replaced consciousness-raising groups, often meeting in people's living rooms.

Reading also provides grist for the imagination and this connects with Randall Allsup's (2003: 157) definition of praxis, which varies slightly from Freire's: "Praxis … is not simply the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, but is instead the slow burning fuse of possibility and action." Critical to Allsup's idea of praxis is the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios and alternative points-of-view and reading, novels especially, can help facilitate that. Novels can offer readers access to experiences and situations that may be new to them. They also offer the sense that things are "up for grabs" (Vonnegut, 2008: 6). But Allsup's point is that imagining other/new situations is not the end point: it is just the beginning. The creative work of imagination will show what may be possible but action must follow. Otherwise, the imagination operates within a vacuum.

Reading can also play a pivotal role in peace education as it provides experience in interpretation. In Martha Greene's 'Education and Disarmament', (1982: 129) she argues that ideas surrounding peace education need to be revisited and implemented.

> to talk of nations or structures instead of people; to use words like 'victory' and 'defeat'; to talk about a 'great war'; to deal uncritically with 'heroism' and 'martial law': all this is to distort and to falsify, if attention is not drawn to the interpretive process itself.

As Allsup (2003: 165) notes, imperative to Green's ideas of peace education is the notion that "[u]nderstanding reality … requires interpretation." Reading, and book clubs as I hinted at earlier, provide a site for this interpretative practice.

And finally, it's not just the reading process, but the writing process that engenders empathy. Regardless of the published product, the author who attempts a new voice, a new point-of-view, a new character (whose actions must be consistent and yet surprising for the reader to 'believe' in her) the negotiation with alterity seems inevitable unless the character is based specifically on the author. While I'm wary of universalising creative experience, I've found writing fiction to be bound with my ability to consider outside points-of-view. So perhaps we need to support NSW writers' centres, not just because they might lead to cultural capital and Australian publications, but because reading *and* writing support our ability to empathise, something critical to the Australian value of 'peacefulness' (as stated in the guide for those undertaking the Australian citizenship test).

In summary, new literary ethics can support social and peace activism. Reading and writing the novel can lay critical groundwork for imagining alternative realities and worlds. It also can facilitate empathetic learning and provide a platform for critical reflection, all necessary aspects of peace activism. However, I agree with Freire that it's important to pursue action with reflection and while reading may prove a crucial component in facilitating this reflection, the text is not the end point. Its strength lies in building empathy. As Allsup (2003: 167) notes: "Moral education–peace education–and the arts are joined by the empathetic … To have hope, we must disavow the indifferent, the fixed, the silent. Praxis requires us to act…"

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