

Readers, writers and critics - a constructivist look at literature

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Don Bannister whose contributions to PCP are being celebrated at this conference has probably done more to extending the range of convenience of PCP than anyone else. Just before his death, he spoke on “A *PCT* view of novel writing and reading”, at the International Congress on PCP in Cambridge, in 1985. He was especially prepared to speak about this topic since he had completed, to my knowledge, five novels himself by then. Since Bannister-the-novelist is the topic of another paper at this conference I am not going into details of critiquing these novels. Rather I shall speak more generally about the Three Rs of Literature from a PCP perspective: (W)riters, Readers and Reviewers, or, in conventional spelling: Writers, readers, and critics.

The three main fields of literary production are prose, poetry, and drama. All of them have been covered by PCP writers but only to a very small degree. In the very last chapter, on ‘New Avenues’, in the new International Handbook of PCP, Fay Fransella devotes one page to Literary Criticism and writes that “in a sense, one might say that Kelly was, himself, something of a literary critic” when he wrote about the cycles Hamlet found himself in. The Cambridge Congress book (Fransella and Thomas, 1986) has papers on prose and poetry but after that, not many papers seem to have been published. This should be surprising as literature (in the sense of novel reading) is so much a part of almost everyone’s life. Which is why everyone might consider her/himself as an expert. Maybe that is one reason why PCP scholars have refrained from applying their tools to this field.

Novel reading

“Novel reading is an exercise in continuous *anticipation*”, that’s how Bannister’s paper begins. The reader is “constantly subject to *validation* or *invalidation*” and may “experience the unfolding events as being outside the *range of convenience* of his or her construing”. So, according to Bannister, the reader is a construer and everything we have learnt about construing then may apply to the human activity of reading. As readers we crave confirmation of our expectations, i. e. validation – but not too much because we do not want to feel bored. We want the range of convenience of our constructs to be widened – but not in a too daring way. Invalidation is around the corner, but we may also welcome the chance of *revising* our initial construing.

Novel writing

“Novel writing is an exercise in the controlled elaboration of an author’s construct system”, says Bannister, and goes on, “a novel stems from some personal intersect of elements and constructs”. *Intersect of elements and constructs* is a term sometimes used for a Repertory Grid, so in a way, one could say that the author works on an internal Repertory Grid, something like ‘Kelly’s Matrix of Decision’ with the ensuing question: “Where do we go from here?” For a novel is not a cross-section, the description of a status quo, it is rather the depiction of a process, with a beginning and a goal or at least an ending. It seems there are two types of novel writing. One works more *pre-emptive*, fulfilling a plan, in a way working top-

down. The author has an idea where he is going, a kind of *superordinate construction*, and elaborates the subordinate details. (I think I remember reading that John Irving is a writer of this kind.) Others, and Bannister describes himself as such, may have a general idea but when writing experience a kind of travel into uncharted territory and are sometimes surprised where their characters are moving and where they are literally taking the author – somehow *in search of a superordinate construction*. Much of the frustrations that many writers report are probably due to invalidations they are experiencing when trying to make sense of what they are writing. And it may seem ‘false’ in the light of his or her construct system.

Bannister here sees varying forms of the *creativity cycle*, with its succession of loosening and tightening processes. At the heart of novel writing, he thinks, is “exactly this deriving, working out, of the subordinate (the detail and content of a novel) from the superordinate (the theme of the novel)”. Much to his surprise, the theme of his first book, *Sam Chard*, changed from his childhood view of a Yorkshire pit village community to an “alternative autobiography” – while he was writing the book.

Usually, a writer does not write for himself, or most writers don’t. They have a fantasized *reader* on their minds. Therefore *sociality* is required: will the reader be able to construe my constructions? Am I able to construe the readers’ constructions so they are able to construe my constructions? Bannister warns of imagining the ‘typical’ reader – s/he is only one out of many. This is where a mediator comes into the picture: the critic.

Novel reviewing

Who is the critic reviewing a book? S/he need not be a professional. The Internet bookshop *Amazon* encourages readers to write reviews. Indeed, some readers write reviews and mail them to Amazon. Then Amazon asks us: *was this review helpful for you?* Now let’s consider what happens here from a PCP point of view. The reader is asked to share his constructions of the author’s constructions as elaborated in the book with us potential readers. And we are asked to share what it caused with or within us. How did it affect or influence *our* constructions? Did it extend our constructions; did we arrive at a higher degree of definition? Did it make us curious, i. e. did we expect to engage in some sort of cycle?

In this case, the critics are laypersons. The professional critic commands a more complex, more differentiated way of comparing constructions and assessing the potential gain for the reader. However, most critics are probably not aware that they are handling constructions.

Constructive Criticism

Fortunately, twelve years ago, a journal named *Constructive Criticism* was published. Unfortunately, it survived for one year only. But in the four issues, the editor *Cintra Whitehead*, published a theory of literary criticism from a PCP perspective, a number of analyses of classical plays and novels, and a number of short stories and poems.

C. Whitehead puts her approach in the context of a general theory of psychologically informed literary criticism. Hitherto this has been mainly a domain of Psychoanalysis. Indeed, Freud himself often analysed literary productions from a psychoanalytic point of view. Whitehead uses Kelly’s format of describing a theory by a fundamental postulate and a number of corollaries.

The General Theory of Psychological Literary Criticism (Cintra Whitehead, 1991)

Cardinal postulate

The **personality theory** which an author, critic, or reader holds **will find expression** in his/her respective **creation, interpretation, or construing of a literary work** and will affect and indeed determine the author's critic's, or reader's theory of literature and such literary concepts as tragedy and comedy as well as his/her theory of criticism.

8 corollaries:

1. An **author's** personal, informal, implicit **personality theory will find expression** in a literary work through the author's **manipulation of theme, plot, character, figurative language, style, and choice of genre** in which to work.

2. A psychological literary **critic's** personal, informal, implicit **personality theory will find expression** in his/her ability – or inability – to **recognize and communicate the author's** personality theory as expressed in the literary work.

If the critic is knowledgeable enough, he/she will be able to match the author's personality theory to one of the formal, explicit theories or types of theories and will be able to recognize any contradictions in the author's system.

If the psychological literary critic is familiar with only one or two personality theories, he/she will attempt to superimpose those theories on the author and his/her work, making the author conform to the Procrustean bed of the critic's personal theory and/or the formal theory the critic chooses to superimpose upon the author's work.

3. A **reader** untrained in literary criticism or personality theory will perceive a literary work or criticism of that work **through his/her own informal, implicit personality theory**.

To the extent that his/her theory **matches** that of the author as expressed in the work, or to the extent that he/she is able to **stretch** his/her own personal theory to accommodate the author's theory, he/she will "like" the work.

The reader will respond favorably to **criticism** that **broadens** his/her view of the work by agreeing with or extending his/her personality theory, but will probably **reject** criticism that originates from a personality theory that is alien both to his own and that of the author.

4. Definitions of and appreciations of **tragedy and comedy** will **differ** for each personality theory or type of theory according to each personality theory's philosophical assumptions and conclusions about causation, determinism, chance, volition, realism/idealism, dualism/monism, epistemology, and other issues which may be important to particular theories.'

5. Whether tragedy, epic, or another genre is seen as the **highest form of literature** will depend on the individual's theoretical view of the issues listed in Corollary 4.

6. Because no theory can be proven or disproven in toto, an **author, critic, or reader** (like a scientific theorist) often **chooses** a theory on an aesthetic basis.

There is a circularity in this: a theory is pleasing because it is my theory and it is my theory because it is pleasing.

An author or psychological literary critic who chooses a theory on an aesthetic basis needs to understand the appeal the theory holds for him/her in some detail and must therefore closely examine assumptions, conclusions, and especially the rewards or pay-offs for holding that theory.

Unfortunately the pay-offs may be such economically important but intellectually trivial considerations as being thought “avant-garde” or being profitably accepted by a school or movement.

7. A psychological literary **critic’s training** may actually limit his/her knowledge of personality theories to **one particular theory** (as is the case in academic programs that champion psychoanalysis as the only psychology relevant to literary criticism).

The critic will then try to use the one theory which he/she “knows” even though it does not accord with his/her own informal implicit personality theory. The critic in such a case may suffer confusion and attempt to conquer it by exercising one or more of the following options: He/she may resort to applying formulas (i.e., all mother/father/son relationships must be interpreted as--and only as--oedipal conflicts; all vaguely elongated objects must be phallic symbols, while all concave objects must be vaginal symbols. Or the critic may accuse the author of being “neurotic” or “schizoid” (split) because the author has failed to match the theory the critic thrusts on him/her after the fact of literary creation. Or the critic may search for another theory to add to his/her arsenal and may enthusiastically accept a theory whose assumptions and conclusions are totally incompatible with those of the first.

8. **Eclecticism** in the use of two or more theories simultaneously will be appropriate only when the theories chosen share philosophical assumptions.

It would be useless, for instance, to try to use both Freud’s and Adler’s theories at the same time for they would simply cancel each other. However, one might use the theories of Alfred Adler and George Kelly together to great advantage and might pair Kelly with Maslow or Rogers without descending to absurdity so long as one recognizes the difference in their theories at the same time that one recognizes the similarities in their assumptive systems.

(**Emphasis** by me, J.S.)

The four issues of Constructive Criticism contain a number of papers analysing well-known pieces of literature – plays and novels -, mostly by C. Whitehead herself. In a paper on *Oedipus* – the legend and the original play by *Sophokles* – she contrasts a PCP approach to the psychoanalytical view, of course a pivotal point in psychoanalytical theorising (CC, 2, 1991). She follows Kelly in an analysis of *Hamlet*. I’d like to quote the last paragraph in her paper on Hamlet:

“Horatio and Fortinbras to a certain extent, and the audience to a greater extent, have come through the play with elaborated construct systems never permitted to the protagonist or the other characters in the play. Hamlet is thus a tragedy of knowing vs. not knowing, but of knowing with the emotions and the will as well as with the intellect. The personal construct theorist will suspect that the play’s unrivaled position in English drama results from its dramatization of the human

need for all of us, like Hamlet, to be man-the-scientist who must decide when to trust intuition and emotion (which is after all a way of construing through preverbal constructs) and when and how to state and test hypotheses about life and the universe in order to predict and control life events.”

In another paper *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are seen as located on opposing ends of a number of constructs (CC, 2, 1991). *King Lear* is being analysed (CC, 2, 1991). *Thomas Hardy's* novel *Jude the Obscure* is interpreted as one novel illustrating most clearly the theory of personal constructs (CC, 2, 1991). On a more general level, *Tragedy and Comedy* are treated from a PCP point of view (CC, 2, 1991).

Besides, a number of short stories and poems are published - interestingly exclusively by woman writers, including herself - that are probably meant to demonstrate PCP aspects in writing (as opposed to critiquing), but this is not commented on.

Construing Poetry

This takes us to a different aspect of the subject. Novels and plays are comparatively easy to analyse from a PCP perspective, because they are explicit in that sense that the writer lets the reader know what s/he means – more or less. Poems are mostly much more cryptic and open to individual interpretation, that is to the application of the reader's personal constructions. In the same volume that had Bannister's paper published there is a chapter by David Miall on responses to poetry. Here the focus is not on the writer or the critic but on the reader. And the main topic is the relation of response to poetry to emotion.

“In the context of response to poetry, emotion is the sign of a construct system in transition, but emotion also anticipates and helps determine the direction of transition. In this sense emotion is productive, a form of thinking”.

“Poetry offers a particularly interesting challenge because of the density and ambiguity of most poems. ... Construct theory suggests that we see a poem as a small-scale construct system.”

The interesting issue is what the response to a poem reveals about a reader's construct system. “Do the reader's constructs adequately match those that the poem appears to offer?” Miall had students write accounts of their responses to poems, and did so at different stages of responses. He found that the first responses had more to do with *emotions* than the later ones when *conceptual* responses prevail. In a repertory grid study he used parts of a poem as elements whereupon students provided their constructs. One of his conclusions was that the structure of a poem channelizes the reading process in ways that are superordinate to the interpretative constructs applied by readers, thus implying a kind of commonality in the responses. According to Miall, *anticipation* here is not the anticipation of events. What is being anticipated is the elaboration of a construct system, that is, a set of constructs that will be sufficient to grasp the main structure and meaning of the poem. The processes are often not very conscious ones. “The poem, through its effects on emotions, is organising those aspects of the reader's construct system which it requires for its interpretation”. A consequence of these results and considerations is that teachers in literature classes should refrain from letting their constructs dominate the discussion. Rather the students should be enabled to develop their own anticipatory implications of their response.

Recently, Richard Bell (2001) has explored the relationship between poetry and PCT.

Constructivist writing

Everything said so far applies to any kind of literature. It is a constructivist way of looking at literature, a constructivist way of making sense of literature, of interpreting literature.

The last section deals, very tentatively, with the questions whether there is a ‘constructivist way of writing’? What would that mean? Perhaps pursuing some sort of ‘*applied constructivist alternativism*’: E. g. a story told by different people – what did really happen? Or: one person has several options. Apparently this has been explored in some ways of ‘postmodern’ writing. Luis Botella (2002) quotes Fowler as saying:

“Distinguishing much postmodern fiction was an awareness that simple realism leaves out a good deal, and presupposes countless assumptions about what constitutes the real”.

That should sound familiar to PCP ears! Botella mentions Lawrence Durrell’s “Alexandria Quartet” with a “multiplication of narrative voices”, and quotes Hermans, Kempen & van Loon who used the ‘polyphonic novel’ as a metaphor for the self. We may also remember the famous Kurosawa film ‘*Rashomon*’ where three people remember (at least recount) events – it was about murder and rape – in very different ways, leaving in the open what really happened – if ‘really’ has a meaning at all here.

Another interesting way would be to look at what people who consider themselves explicitly as constructivists write, specifically those of our colleagues who write. Do constructivists write ‘in a constructivist way’?

Constructivists writing

I am not attempting at speaking about Bannister’s novels here – that has been done in another paper -, but I should like to call your attention to poems written by PCP colleagues. While Miller Mair’s famous book on the *Poetics of Experience* is just that – and not about the *experience of poetry* (although some passages are written in free verse form), there are some colleagues who actually write (and publish) poems.

Again I am not attempting to interpret them but I should like to close showing two of them. *Ken Sewell* has published a number of poems on his website. Here is one he wrote together with *Rue Cromwell*:

<< Vitaurum >>

And *Sean Brophy* has published as many as five books of poetry. Here is one of five poems presented on his website:

<< The Corner of a Field >>

I’ll leave it to you to decide whether these are ‘constructivist’ poems. Or just poems.

Personal conclusion

Finally, and in concluding: what kind of implication does all this have? For me at least, since I have started thinking about this paper, my attitude towards reviews has changed. More than before, I ask myself: not what is the book about, the novel, what is 'the reality' of the novel, rather: what construction does the reviewer have, and through that, what does s/he convey about the author's constructions, does it make sense for me, and therefore, does it make sense for me, to read and buy (!) the book?

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Vitaurum: Of Our Lives

With eyes wide open I need my hands
To feel my way towards
Some place of verity.
The souls of others are foreign lands.
Body--more than thought--
Aspires to eternity.

It is a two-act play;
To touch, to center, to learn the tongue,
Then the common fate of all
In an unlit cave.

One cone of light beams down
From some random rocky crevice
Inches, perhaps miles, ahead.

I throw a coin to test the span.
Did it ricochet in sight? Or, did some gnome
Intercept, his partners fooling me in the dis-
tance
By throwing coins of their own?

Is it self or gnome or randomness to kill?
--Or to buy off?
Without affirmation, destiny exists not.
With both, transcendence exists:
'Tis summer, and the days are long.

With arms wide open I wait alone
'Neath light and darkness clear
That forever begins.
Receptivity requires an object.
Love--like light--
Defeats definity.

Take the consummate marker of endpoints.
Take the measurer of consequence.
Forever ending.
Forever ending.
Who, then, is lonely?
Blessed are the proligious.

Take him home and out of the abyss.
Take this Gnome to be the bliss
that children know await
the good of deed and clean of hands.
Today's passions--tomorrow's reminiscense.
Eternity's hissing siren song.

Kenneth W. Sewell, Rue L. Cromwell

The Corner of a Field

A small stream dances
Down the drain of a ditch,
Bounded by a barbed wire
Fence with old wooden stakes
Holding hands as tipsy partners
At the start of a crossroads ceili,

Wild fuchsia overhangs the field
Filled with orange mombrecia,
Pale bells of convolvulus.
Purple loosestrife,
Red clover, mauve marsh thistle
And creamy clusters of elder flowers,

Meadow grass stands tall,
Blades blowing with the breeze
Swaying around dock leaves,
Beyond a young mans bends to pitch
His fork into mounds of hay,
Throwing a net to secure his prize,

Yonder an old cowshed leans against
The wind, its stones clinging together
In a dry defence against time,
The old gate stands shut,
Three staves and crossbars,
Calvary in the corner of a field.

Sean Brophy

