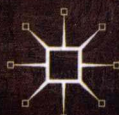




THE CONCEPT OF LITERARY APPLICATION

Readers' Analogies from Text to Life

ANDERS PETTERSSON



The Concept of Literary Application

Readers' Analogies from Text to Life

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I dedicate the book to my wife, Kristina.

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1

The Application of Literature to Life

Readers of literature often focus on attitudes or states of affairs in a text and ask themselves, implicitly, whether they share those attitudes, whether similar states of affairs can be found in real life, and suchlike. In this way readers establish and evaluate comparisons between literature and extra-textual reality, and the focusing, comparing, and evaluating, taken together, make up what I refer to as application. Application is far from an unknown phenomenon, but it has never been discussed in depth, and its aesthetic relevance has often been disputed.

Following is an example of application. In a Dutch empirical study of readers of literature, subjects were asked to submit accounts of their own careers as readers. As part of his answer one of the participants, called "Art" in the study, gave a vivid description of the fascination he felt for Harry Mulisch's novel *The Black Light* (*Het zwarte licht*, 1956) when he was in his teens. Art wrote:

The first real adult book I read was *Het Zwarte Licht* by Mulisch; I was about fifteen years old. It was a startling experience; the dark atmosphere, the downfall of mankind and the sadness of human existence were poured out over me as if it were nothing. The startling thing was, I believe, that I saw my own state of mind, which was characterized by melancholy, expressed on paper. Not that I understood everything that was written, but it was a kind of personal truth that was described. I have reread the book five times.¹

The protagonist of Mulisch's existentialist novel, a man called Maurits, has a very dark outlook on life, and the novel's narrator seems to share his perspective. Apparently, Art took an interest in Maurits's attitudes, compared them with his own thoughts and feelings, and found them

largely identical. The acts that Art describes in the quotation constitute an application of literature to life, such as I define it, and this process of reflection seems to have made Art's own views and feelings clearer to himself and occasioned a kind of epiphany.

Describing application more formally, we can say that a reader who performs an application 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. In Art's example, x can be said to be Maurits's view of life, while y is Art's own view. When comparing the two perspectives, Art finds that they largely coincide: Maurits experiences his fictional world in much the same way as Art experiences his real world, and both Maurits and Art are in states of mind characterized by melancholy. Art's application results in a partly new take on his own view of the world, a change of vision with cognitive and emotive implications. (It should be kept in mind that this represents just one instance of application: the phenomenon can assume a number of forms, partly different from that in Art's example. In the next chapter I introduce more cases.)

Application is not necessarily, or even normally, a conscious phenomenon. When we read, many processes go on below the threshold of our conscious attention: we move our eyes across the page in small jumps (so-called saccades), recognize letters and words, identify sentences, and build up structures of meaning. Application is yet another of those activities in which we engage during reading, and most of the time an unconscious one. The formalized verbal description of application risks conveying an excessively rational and intellectual picture of the mechanism. At the same time, however, it is worth emphasizing that application can very well be perfectly conscious; it can take place after reading or during a pause in reading in which the reader mulls over the content of the text and its wider implications. Art must, obviously, sometimes have pondered the import of *The Black Light* consciously and explicitly.

My account of application is formulated in cognitive terms. In reality, I am speaking of how readers form partial representations of the content of the text, and partial representations of the external world, and how they perform operations on the representations. Yet I do not seek to enter deeply into the reader's mind. I do not make use of any specific ideas about how the human mind is structured – no specific cognitive architecture is presupposed – and consequently I cannot even begin to explain the steps by which various parts of our mental apparatus work

together to produce the focusing, the comparisons, and the evaluations. Much less can I move down to the neurophysiological foundations and attempt to specify what actually occurs in the brain during the course of application. Nevertheless, it is important for me to make my account compatible with mainstream science. I would not, for instance, want to give a picture of application that is bound to seem unrealistic in the light of generally accepted ideas about the processing capacity of the human mind.

The word "application" itself deserves some comment and reflection. In literary studies, the term is perhaps particularly associated with the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and his *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960). In his book, Gadamer criticizes the traditional idea that hermeneutic work only consists in the reconstruction of meaning, in "making intelligible what others have said in speech and text". For him, texts make truth-claims, which means that we cannot, in our interpretations, content ourselves with establishing that an author meant so-and-so. There is an underlying claim to truth or validity which should not be ignored: "wherever an attempt is made to understand (e.g. scripture or the classics), there is reference to the truth that lies hidden in the text and must be brought to light. What is to be understood is, in fact, not thought as part of another's life, but as a truth."² In this context, Gadamer introduces the concept of application. He tells us that readers must apply the truth-claims of the text to their own situation if they want to take the text seriously,³ because, according to Gadamer, "understanding always involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter."⁴

Gadamer's ideas about application were an inspiration for me in the mid-1970s, when I first began to reflect more ambitiously on the acts that readers of literature perform. Gadamer's concept of application is, however, by no means identical with the one employed in the present book. As I explain later, I believe that the "truth" involved in literary transactions is not, in essence, a property of the text but an experiential quality that arises in the reader and is, in the final instance, brought into being by the reader himself or herself. Nor do I find it a prerequisite for application that the reader apply the text to his or her own specific situation. In addition to these divergences, there are important overall differences between Gadamer's philosophical outlook and the kind of thinking to which I adhere.

My choice of the term "application" for the mechanism I describe was not made lightly, but the mechanism could easily be called by another

name. In an earlier book I spoke of much the same complex of reader activities as a "cognitive-affective processing pattern".⁵ While working on the present investigation, I long relied on the expression "analogical thinking" instead of "application", and I used formulations like "analogies from text to life" instead of "application of literature to life".⁶ Little by little, the latter way of speaking came to appear less liable to misunderstanding and easier to defend, but I have no very strong commitment to the term "application" as such. The important thing, of course, is not the word but the mechanism.

Application and drama: Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*

The Black Light is a contemporary and more or less realistic novel, but application is by no means restricted to specific genres or types of literature. Application can be performed in connection with all kinds of fictional prose and also with drama or poetry, and application is just as natural in association with older texts as with modern ones.⁷

Let us think of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (probably composed in 1595 or 1596),⁸ a complex comedy supposedly written to be staged at a noble wedding.⁹ When the play begins, Theseus, Duke of Athens, is to marry Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, in four days' time. The four days prove full of human complications (although no conflicts arise between Theseus and Hippolyta themselves). There is also a deeper, more sinister predicament: Because of deep discord between the king and queen of the fairies, Oberon and Titania, nature itself is in disorder. The country has been plagued by rains that have destroyed the harvest and caused flooding. In the course of the play, however, Oberon and Titania are reconciled. Among the humans, too, everything ends well, and in the final act a triple wedding takes place: not only Theseus and Hippolyta, but also two young Athenian couples get married.

After the wedding dinner the couples and their entourage are entertained with a play, after which everybody goes to bed. At this point, the very end of the play, the fairies arrive, headed by their king. Addressing himself to his fairies, Oberon instructs them to swarm through the house, and he also promises the newly-weds unflinching love and children without blemishes:

Now, until the break of day,
Through this house each fairy stray.

To the best bride-bed will we,
Which by us shall blessed be;
And the issue there create
Ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all the couples three
Ever true in loving be;
And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand:
Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar,
Nor mark prodigious, such as are
Despised in nativity,
Shall upon their children be.
With this field-dew consecrate,
Every fairy take his gait,
And each several chamber bless
Through this palace with sweet peace;
And the owner of it blest,
Ever shall in safety rest.
Trip away; make no stay;
Meet me all by break of day.¹⁰

Countless analogies can be drawn between the play and the real world, some of them very conspicuous. To take a very simple example, aspects of fictional love relationships in the play may bring aspects of real-world love relationships, imagined or experienced, to life in the spectator's or reader's mind.

J.A. Appleyard points to a more overarching way of relating work and world when he writes:

Think of a gentle comedy, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which begins with quarrels between the spirits, mistaken identities among the lovers, and the burlesque of the workmen and their play and ends in a final dance in celebration of love's reconciliations.... "Shakespearean comedy illustrates," says Frye, "as clearly as any mythos we have, the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from 'reality,' but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate" ...¹¹

With the help of the quotation from Northrop Frye, Appleyard implicitly constructs an analogy between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the real world. Appleyard focuses on the images, found at the end of

the drama, of happy requited love and of overall harmony within a group of people, and he establishes a comparison between those states of affairs (x) and equally happy circumstances in the real world (y). However, y is not, as in Art's example, an existing state of affairs, but rather a situation that is imagined or sought for. One could say that Appleyard looks at the blissful states of affairs x in the drama and implicitly raises the question: are there states of affairs y in real life relevantly similar to x ? Can similar states of happy requited love and overall harmony within a group of people be found in real life? His tacit evaluation is that no genuine match (only partial matches) of the happy situation at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is met with in real life. He still finds the situation in the play of great interest as an ideal to emulate – as an image of “the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate”, to use Frye's words. Thus there is an application behind Appleyard's statement, such as I understand it, but the application has a more complex character than in Art's example.

Application and poetry: Plath's “Sheep in Fog”

Application is a cognitive mechanism which consists in a series of operations on mental representations, and poetry seems more an emotional medium than a cognitive one. However, poetry, too, offers us representations to work on, and application is not cognitive in a sense which dissociates it from the reader's feelings or from appreciation of literary form. In Sylvia Plath's “Sheep in Fog” (1963), a poem of 15 lines arranged as five three-line stanzas, which begins

The hills step off into whiteness.
People or stars
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.¹²

we are confronted with a speaker¹³ placed in, or perhaps imagining, a landscape with hills and far fields and a train. Plath presents the speaker as thinking or feeling as if she¹⁴ were a disappointment to surrounding people and things. The initial whiteness gives way to a morning that is blackening, and we find, at the end of the poem, that the speaker is conceiving of life after death as a dark water. Despite the seeming exactness of everything that is said in the poem, and the melancholic beauty of Plath's words, it is not easy to formulate with any precision what we are supposed to imagine to be happening in the world of the text, where a succession of metaphors emerge and disappear with their senses almost,

but not quite, within our reach. There is a floating indistinctness about the poem's world, with its initial whiteness and its blackening morning, its far fields and its imagined heaven ahead, like a dark water.

The opacity of the world that we encounter appears centrally important for the experience of the text. We seem to encounter a speaker whose perceptions of her external world are no longer characterized by ordinary realism. My impression is that she feels that a deeper significance, difficult to capture and describe, is eerily emerging in the things around her. Ordinary reality is giving way to something that is intuited rather than clearly understood, and this emerging deeper reality is dark and ominous. The morning is blackening. The far fields threaten to give way, opening a passage into a starless and fatherless heaven.

There is much in Plath's poem for the reader to focus on and to implicitly reflect on. Just like fiction, poetry can offer a reader several types of starting point for analogies from text to real world: material states of affairs, mental states of characters and speakers, and attitudes expressed by the author. In reading "Sheep in Fog", it is, for example, possible to take an interest in the speaker's attitude or state of mind x and to ask oneself, implicitly, "Is this similar to a state of mind y that I myself have experienced?" or "In what situations may persons find themselves in a state of mind y similar to the state of mind x in the text?" or "Is x a mental perspective that I would like to adopt and translate into a mental perspective y on something in the real world?" or "Is being in this state x what it would be like for me if I were in the real-world state y of facing a creeping danger of destruction against which I could see no real defence?"

I believe that I myself perform some such analogizing when I read Plath's poem but that I also focus on the attitudes expressed by the author (as I generally do when I read). I feel that there is, behind the woman who is facing a creeping danger of destruction against which she can see no real defence, and who describes her situation in the remarkable and memorable way found in the poem, another agent (and this time it seems apt to me to call her Plath) who is showing us the woman and the situation she is in. The attitudes expressed by the author have no exact verbal counterparts (attitudes never do), but according to my reading the woman is being looked upon as extremely perceptive and at the same time existentially helpless; there is sadness in the attitude to her but also matter-of-factness (no actual fear) and acceptance of a kind.¹⁵ What I take to be Plath's expressed perception x of the condition which she describes is something I will be able to recall and to use as a point of reference in thinking and feeling about

actual or possible situations y in real life. In this dimension of my reading, I am not applying literature to life as much as I am acquiring a literary image that can be used as a point of departure for performing such applications.

It is perhaps apparent from the preceding discussion that application, far from being alien to form and feeling, is intimately entwined with the affective and formal dimensions of literature. When we adopt or entertain a perspective on something in the world, that perspective is inevitably tinged with emotion: in perceiving the world we see dangers and we see promises of happiness, and we experience feelings associated with these threats and opportunities. Acts of application open perspectives on the world and are hence closely connected with feelings and emotions. At the same time, application is inextricably involved with form. The formal aspects of the verbal sign itself – the sound structure of the poem, the strophic divisions, et cetera – affect the reader directly, in a stimulus–response manner, or they help the reader to group and arrange the content, or both. The formal aspects of the content – the local, temporal, and attitudinal point of view, et cetera – modify the verbal meaning in important ways, as I noted above with respect to the attitude expressed in Plath's poem. Along both these paths – through the form of the sign and the form of its content – form affects the reader's impression of the verbal meaning and thus the starting point for his or her applications.

The structure of this book

My account of the mechanism of application is developed in various ways throughout the book. Part of the elaboration consists in a defence of the aesthetic importance of application.

It is well known that readers of literature sometimes compare text and reality, and references to such comparison can be found in many works in literary studies, in philosophical aesthetics, and in empirical aesthetics. For instance, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen write, in their *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (1994), about readers learning from literature: "A reader might pick up incidental facts or come to believe broader generalizations as a result of reading fiction: either because these are explicitly presented in the descriptive content or because they are derivable in obvious ways.... By reflecting on fictional content readers can come to see themselves and others under the same aspects that characterize the fictive states of affairs."¹⁶ I have not seen literary scholars and critics comment on the mechanism as principally

and generally as Lamarque and Olsen do, but they sometimes clearly presuppose its existence. For instance, Christopher Butler refers in passing to such transfer from text to life in his *Pleasure and the Arts* (2004). "You see *King Lear*," he says, "and you think, 'so that is the way the world might go' when evil comes to power. Or you read *To the Lighthouse* and you think, 'so that is the process by which someone could deal with grief. How they might get it into order.'"¹⁷

Butler seems to find these benefits from literature perfectly in order, but some philosophers argue that such comparisons by readers lack aesthetic relevance, since literary experience proper has nothing to do with acquiring new perspectives on actual realities.¹⁸ Others readily accept cognitive profit as a possible constituent of what literature as an art has to offer but consider that the text must be the central factor in a literary transaction. For that reason they maintain that it is the text itself that we should understand and that to apply literature to life is to use the text for extra-literary purposes, not to understand it.¹⁹ That would disqualify Art's reading of *The Black Light* as a proper response to literature, since his application must be considered to go beyond the text: the novel cannot very well be speaking specifically of Art and his individual state of mind. In my view, though, application is genuinely significant in the normal and impeccable reading of literature and its importance is strongly underrated.

In the present book, I attempt to demonstrate that application plays a strategic part in the reading of literature for pleasure and artistic satisfaction, such as it is practised today in the Western world,²⁰ and that an understanding of application can illuminate many aspects of literary communication,²¹ including the cognitive significance of literature and such phenomena as empathy and identification. In the first three chapters my main objective is to give an explicit and general account of the mechanism. My explanation of application above represents a first step in that direction, and the analysis is developed further in Chapters 2 and 3 through the introduction of more examples and the integration of application into an overall account of the act of reading.

After that, I describe the role of application for the cognitive and affective impact of literature. The question of the cognitive importance of literature has a long history in Western thinking. It was addressed first by Plato and then, much more positively, by Aristotle, who famously characterized poetry as more philosophical than history because of its preoccupation with what is generally, not incidentally, the case.²² Yet it is difficult to specify what the cognitive importance of literature can

consist in. If you really try to make it explicit what we can learn from a given text, you risk finding only thoughts that are true but trivial. For that reason, some embrace a more formally oriented view of literature, according to which a text, when approached as a work of art, has nothing specific to say about reality. That standpoint is also problematic, however, since it flatly contradicts many people's intuition. Bringing application into the picture offers us a new way out of this old and persistent dilemma, as seen in Chapter 4.

The affective importance of literature is nowadays usually approached via the concepts of empathy, identification, or simulation, but a theory of "transportation" has also been brought in by some psychologists. Transportation theory uses references to the attraction that literature exerts on readers who are "lost in a book"²³ to help explain the effects of literature. Theories of empathy, identification, simulation, and transportation may seem to compete with application theory as explanations of what goes on in the reading of literature. However, I argue in Chapters 5 and 6 that the view of the act of reading introduced in Chapter 3 promotes the understanding of all the four "affective" mechanisms and that they are intertwined with application rather than alternatives to it. Chapter 7, on the aesthetic approach to literature, considers, among other things, the application of form.

However, as I already mentioned, certain theorists deny the aesthetic relevance of application. Some consider that only elements contained in the text itself are proper objects of literary response; I call this "the textual-supremacy argument". Others embrace a conception of the aesthetic according to which only aesthetic features of the artistic object itself are aesthetically relevant; I call this "the aesthetic argument". In my defence of application I, in essence, argue that both objections rest on mistaken premises, and I outline a different way of viewing the text and literature itself as a form of art.

The idea that literary experience is an experiencing of the text, and the consequent belief in the supremacy of the text, is probably shared by most thinkers about literature. In my view, however, the text that is really there, the text for which a claim of objective existence can be raised, has too meagre a content to function as more than an invitation to literary-aesthetic experiencing, so that such reader activities as application become necessary for a literary experience to arise. Far from being aesthetically irrelevant, they represent crucial components of standard literary reading and produce constitutive elements of literary experience. Given the relative meagreness of the "objective" text, literary experience would be unthinkable without creative, not merely

reproductive or concretizing, contributions by the individual reader. The discussion of the nature of a text takes up all of Chapter 8.

Chapters 9–11 are meant as a refutation of the aesthetic argument against application. I seek to demonstrate that application forms part of our existing literary practice, that consideration of the concept of literature cannot prove that application is not properly literary, and that no good grounds can be found for purely normative arguments against the aesthetic relevance of application. Chapter 9 describes literary practice such as it exists around us in the modern Western world, and the place of application in that practice is explained. The chapter shows that people do not in fact read literature in the way that the aesthetic argument presupposes. In Chapter 10, then, I turn to the concept of literature itself as it is commonly understood, and I offer a critical review of the idea, widespread in analytical aesthetics, that you can draw worthwhile conclusions about the nature of literary art from an analysis of the very concept of literature. The discussion makes it clear that you cannot derive substantive prescriptions for the reading of literature from the concept of literature itself, which means that a consideration of the concept of literature will not show common literary practice to be defective. In Chapter 11 I argue that you cannot mount a credible normative argument against application either. This is done against the background of a general discussion of norms and values; I also offer reflections on the limits of permissible application.

It is no doubt apparent by now that the book ranges widely, despite being an analysis of but a single mechanism in the reading of literature. Indeed, the book covers most of the central issues in the understanding of literature as an art, even if it does so very succinctly and from a specific vantage point. The resulting picture of literature is summed up, and also placed in a broader perspective, in the short final chapter, Chapter 12.

I emphasize the importance of application quite strongly, but I certainly do not want to present a one-sided account of literature centred on a single explanation. Very many processes are involved in the reading of literature, and many views of the text and its role represent defensible and interesting partial takes on literary art. In the rest of this introductory chapter I look at five different conceptions of literature or ways of perceiving a text: as a delightful and fascinating object, as a stimulus eliciting responses from the reader, as a representation of reality, as a virtual reality, and as an incitement to reflection. To a considerable extent, these conceptions can be combined into more complex views of literary transactions. Application can function together with

four of the five views, and I comment on those possibilities. As I already mentioned, it is my ambition to integrate application into a larger picture of the reading of literature, and my discussion of ways of thinking about literary transactions helps lay the foundation for that.

The delightful-object view of literary texts

It is a very old idea that literature aims to give pleasure or delight. In his verse-letter to the brothers Piso, known as *The Art of Poetry* (*De arte poetica* or *Ars poetica*), Horace remarked that the poet wishes either to be of use or to please, or both: "The poet's aim is either to profit or to please, or to blend in one the delightful and the useful."²⁴ As we can see, Horace refers to the possibility that a work of poetry is meant to simply delight the reader (even if he suggests that really good poetic texts achieve more than that). A century later Quintilian, the theorist of oratory, went further, saying in *The Training of the Orator* (*Institutio oratoria*) that poetry solely aims at pleasure ("solam petit voluptatem"²⁵).

However, the delightful-object view does not simply amount to the idea that a (good) text is delightful and brings delight. Everybody could accept that – no lover of literature will deny that a text of high quality represents a source of delight and fascination. As I define it here, the delightful-object view has a more specific and controversial content. According to the delightful-object view, it is certain objective properties of the text that delight the reader. It may require taste and training to perceive the relevant properties, but if an attentive and suitably equipped reader reads a valuable text, he or she will become aware of its positive properties and be delighted. The relevant properties can be, for instance, the *aesthetic* properties of the text: the competent reader reads the text, perceives its positive aesthetic features, and enjoys what he or she perceives.

I know of no contemporary literary critic who entertains the delightful-object view in this entirely explicit form, but some philosophical aestheticians do. For example, Gary Iseminger offers an analysis of precisely this kind as a general explanation of aesthetic communication, literary communication included.²⁶

Other views of the literary object and its role are associated with other explanations of the reader's delight. If, for instance, the delight is understood as caused by the perspectives opened up by the application of literature to life, the reader will have arrived, instead, at a variety of the incitement-to-reflection view. But proponents of the delightful-object view typically maintain that nothing more can justifiably be said