

Many Different Things, All to the Same People
by Benjamin Taylor

A gray haired and somewhat haggard scientist staring at a woman's removed heart as she lay exposed on a table is quintessentially my perception of literary criticism. That is a fitting image, as the scientist and his patient are on the cover of *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Rivkin and Ryan), from which my opinions stem. My perceptions of literary criticism stem from the schizophrenic nature of my conceptions of the field. From the point of view of a would-be-someday-will-be scholar, I am the man examining the heart. I want to know what makes literature *literature*. I find it a valuable field of study, but occasionally a letdown because it is built on and grows from and because of the opinions of other scholars. From the point of view of a writer of fiction and poetry (quality notwithstanding), I am the woman on the table. That's my heart being examined by the scientist. In a roundabout way, I am examining my own heart in studying literary criticism. I consider it a necessary study if one wants to write better prose; it is an indispensable resource for someone wanting to understand and interpret literature for themselves or for a classroom, regardless of other creative aspirations.

Take this passage from Cleanth Brooks' "The Language of Paradox", for example: "The phoenix rises from its ashes; or ought to rise; but it will not arise for all our mere sifting and measuring the ashes [. . .] (38)." Brooks is examining the paradoxical nature of literary study, and ends his article appropriately, I think, with the aforementioned paradox. Brooks uses the phoenix-the mythical bird reborn from its ashes-to represent literary endeavors, and its inability to be reborn from said ashes because critics keep prodding and poking the ashes.

If we are to know, we must examine; that's the scientist again. What if the scientist is wrong? There's the woman on the table again. Brooks asserts that criticism is necessary in order to approach the truth in a piece of literature, but we should be prepared to accept paradoxical nature of imagination itself (38), lest we never get past the ashes. That is fair warning, as my most pressing reservation regarding literary study is the fear that *we are ALL wrong*. Brooks prepares the student of literature for the paradoxes and preconceptions of a critical study of literature.

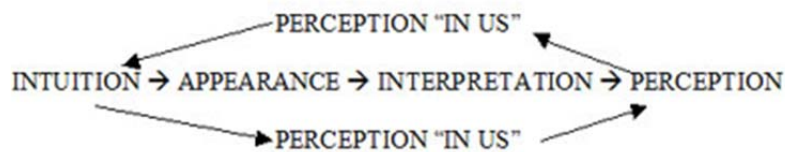
How would we know if there was a phoenix there if we did not prod? And if there is a phoenix (whether we see it or not), there is no definite way to say it doesn't rise. The phoenix will always rise, maybe not as Brooks intended it to rise, but it will rise. He has written that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, and to a lesser extent metaphor. Metaphor (and thereby poetry) cannot be understood exactly as the writer intended, which brings the argument full circle. How is an audience to fully appreciate a work of literature if it isn't dissected?

By nature, the above paragraph is paradoxical. I have interpreted Brooks to mean that paradox is a necessary part of literature, and one had best come to terms with it lest the literature will never be fully understood (if such a thing could ever happen). It is the paradox that is being considered. Does that stifle the development of literature, does it cheapen the work being addressed, or is an interpretation of paradox the allure?

Friedrich Nietzsche, in "The Will to Power" uses paradox to explain his theory of opposites. "From a standpoint of morality, the world is false. But to the extent that morality itself is a part of the world, morality is false (269)." Regarding paradox, could such a relationship even exist if it weren't for coherent, easy to understand-simple-statements and relations? Nietzsche gravitates to the notion that the world is false and morality is false because it is of the world, but

if falsehood is vicarious between the two, couldn't they both be true, depending on what they are compared to? I have begun to think opposite and falsehood, which Nietzsche expounds upon, to be completely independent of each other, and a matter of perception.

In the study of literature, paradox exists both in the texts and in the criticism itself. An author, as Brooks has written, depends on paradox to recount a specific occurrence while the critic or philosopher (as is evident in both Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant) often relies on paradox to explain or interpret it. Kant, in "Transcendental Aesthetic" posits the difference between representation and object against our perception of them. "We then realize that not only are the drops of rain mere appearances, but that even their round shape, nay even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves, but merely modifications or fundamental forms of our sensible intuition, and that the transcendental object remains unknown to us. (132-33)" Paired with Nietzsche's paradoxical take on Morality and The World, Kant's contribution to writing and literature generates in my mind the following diagram, which is my attempt to get at the perception of paradox:



The aggregate of the above thought diagram amounts to the individual's perception and ultimately the individual's understanding of a given paradox. In my study of criticism thus far, I have developed the idea that everything relating to our perception of any event is based on how the event is intuited in an individual's mind. Regardless of what something is named and regardless of the way it is symbolized or signified, the appearance as it correlates with intuition initiates an interpretive effort on the part of the individual, which ultimately begets one's perception.

There is a set of arrows relating perception back to intuition in the diagram. Perception of an event-a paradox-is directly related to how an individual mind can initially interpret it. There is a first impression that, no matter the deliberate analysis and interpretation of appearance, will influence the way a paradox is understood.

The passage cited from Nietzsche, for example, rendered in my mind that the world is false, but it is defined as such because of something in it, thus invalidating the entire argument. Before I read the passage, I was inclined to take a pessimistic stance toward a good deal of my materialistic ("worldly") surroundings; such a disposition would therefore effect my intuition of such a paradox. Even a "final" perception of a paradox has the ability to force the mind to rethink the initial intuition, leading to a complete re-conception of the paradox: hence the paradoxical nature of paradox.

If Cleanth Brooks' essay on the effects of literary study on literature itself coupled with the idea of the paradoxical nature of the beast is any guidance in the field (and I have come to believe it is), then how a paradox is perceived is therefore based in Kant's notion of intuition. Kant would argue that nothing-not even 'paradox'-has meaning until we assign meaning to it. Humans define and debate the functions of *dramatis personae* in whatever situation they find themselves in. A paradox can therefore be interpreted in as many ways as there are minds to interpret it. So, Brooks' paradox in the conclusion of "The Language of Paradox" could be a

statement of fact, or opinion; it could be merely a road sign warning of paradoxical content to come. It seems to me to be the latter. Based on the literature I have read and the criticism of it, paradox is an integral part of the discourse regarding literary study.

With grounding in the argument that perception of paradox lies within the intuition of a specific audience, I am beginning to think *no one* is wrong. Ever. From Vladimir Propp's perspective, all narrative—all the stories—are transferrable to varied audiences and situations dependent on their *dramatis personae*. Therefore, it stands that a piece of literature could be retold with different characters but still evoke the same meanings from a different audience. This furthers my contention of the paradoxical nature of perception. How can one narrative be transcribed across several *dramatis personae*, evoke the same meaning, but at the same time tell a different story?

According to Propp, "the repetition of functions by various characters was long ago observed in myths and beliefs by historians of religion, but it was not observed by historians of the tale (cf. Wundt and Negelein). Just as the characteristics and functions of deities are transferred from one to another [...] the functions of certain tale personages are likewise transferred (73)." He lists four instances in which this is the case; in each, a different person receives a different gift, which leads to the same end. This is totally plausible and it grows from Brooks' analysis of paradox. How can two things be and mean the same?

Conditions may change in various literatures, but morals, lessons, and—to a debatable point—intent does not change. Again, how does the critic know the author's intent? Does it hold sway in the realm of criticism, or does it even exist? The writer could easily include unintentional aspects into a story, thereby discrediting whatever 'intent' might be uttered; the author could also lie, or unknowingly augment her analysis. Again, this would discredit the author's intent.

Narrative, however it is presented, exists. It is transferrable according to Propp, and it is independent of whatever characters may be conveying it.

In a sense, Propp's essay is the culmination of a litany of theories whose plausibility I have considered for quite some time (even before I had any formal education regarding theory). Propp's argument that characters are merely functions resonates with me because it is relieving to have read credited scholarship that would agree that certain characters are only serving a purpose.

All perception, therefore, should be considered paradox. This works in Propp's theory of narrative independence because it asserts that the same narrative works to achieve different ends in each dimension of its presentation. The observation that the same narrative could be told through two different sets of characters and achieve either the same or different ends (depending on intuition) is paradoxical in context. When a work of literature is criticized, its critics illustrate the point. Each time two critics interpret an instance in the same text differently, or conversely, two different instances in two different texts the same, they are ratifying the paradoxical nature of literature.

Each person intuitively has a different perception based on their reading.

A continued study of literature must be footed strongly in an understanding of the paradoxes associated with reading, writing and criticizing literature. The process a student or

scholar will employ to derive meaning from a text or criticism will vary each time, as will the derived meaning. This is the proverbial phoenix raising itself from the ashes Brooks warns of. We cannot know without examining and we cannot examine without perceiving some aspect of the text erroneously. Literature itself is paradox by nature: we want to know, but we can never know for sure, and in any instance we have the narrative or poem at face value which allows us "knowledge" of it.

To develop as a scholar is to make peace with paradox. It is to know without certainty, but to examine text in the search for a certainty that may never exist.

I am back in the book cover's examination room again, feeling that I am holding my own heart in my hand; staring at it, wanting to know each singular cell. Having mused thus far on its nature, I can say I intuit more than I would have had I never removed my writer's heart in the first place. It is the purpose and the guiding premise of my study of literature to know my own theory and perception of story and narrative.

Works Cited

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