

ANNIKEN GREVE

## To Read a Literary Work: Human Responsiveness and the Question of Method

The question of method is rarely raised within the field of contemporary literary studies.<sup>1</sup> The issue is seen as belonging to the heyday of logical positivism and scientism, and contempt for method is one of the forms taken by resistance to the unity-of-science ideology. We are not interested in adopting the objectives and methods of physics and other so-called exact sciences. Our field of research is of a completely different nature, and the aims and methods of the natural sciences cannot be transferred to the study of literary texts without damaging both the objects of study and the point of studying these objects.

There is no way the study of literature can be restricted to making objective observations about the work in question, and no way the significance of a literary work can be brought out solely by reporting such objectively observable facts about the text. Literary works belong to the realm of meaning, not to the realm of fact, and the reading of a text requires not just the capacity to make observations in the text but also the capacity to respond to it as a human being.

One can share the view that the unity-of-science ideology that goes hand in hand with logical positivism is seriously flawed, as suggested above, and still think that the question of method ought to be at the centre of the meta-discussions and self-reflection of literary scholars. Together with Rolf Gaasland, professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Tromsø, as an expression of such self-reflection, I have developed a methodical system for the interpretation of literary works.<sup>2</sup> It recognizes the need for a systematic procedure for achieving a specified goal that we take to be both valid and central (although not the only valid or uniquely central goal) to literary studies: to establish the communicative value of the text considered as a whole. Establishing that requires an opinion about what the overall concern of the text is, and also about the

**Associate Professor Anniken Greve**

Department of Culture and Literature,

University of Tromsø, Norway

E-mail: [anniken.greve@hum.uit.no](mailto:anniken.greve@hum.uit.no)

CAS Fellow 2005/2006



---

1: The questions have been replaced by the question of what role theory ought to play in scholarly readings of literary texts, a problem that is too huge to be even touched upon here.

2: The methodical system is published on the internet: <http://textpraxis.uit.no>, and is produced in Norwegian, but an English version will be published on the same address in the course of 2007.

attitude to that concern, as expressed in the text. Normally we are in a position to draw conclusions about concern and attitude only towards the end of the reading process.

The methodical system offers a procedure for systematically paying attention to all the different aspects of a text that may influence its communicative value. It seeks to be as comprehensive as necessary and as simple as possible in relation to the stated goal. The system specifies a list of tasks with which the interpreter approaches the text in order to work out the contribution each of these aspects make to the overall communicative value of the text, then suggests a procedure for bringing observations relating to these various aspects together into an integrated interpretation. The system orders these tasks into three groups or three consecutive phases of the work: *the initial phase of investigation*, *the phase of analysis* and *the phase of synthesis*. While the order of the tasks within each of these phases is to some extent arbitrary and a matter of taste or convenience, the ordering of the three phases is crucial: One needs the information and insight into the text generated by the first sequence of tasks when working on the second sequence, and one cannot solve the tasks in the third sequence satisfactorily without having dealt with the two first groups of tasks.

Leaving all the theoretical problems involved in this way of thinking about the (study of the) literary text for another occasion,<sup>3</sup> allow me to clarify what this methodical system seeks to achieve and what it does not seek to achieve. It does not aim at 'objective interpretations', if that term is used to refer to interpretations that do not bear the mark of the person who made them. It is unlikely that two persons going through the procedure independently of each other would reach exactly the same results. It is even unlikely that the same person going through the procedure twice would arrive at the exactly the same conclusions. Making the result *reproducible*, which is one of the main purposes of method within the natural sciences, is not an issue here.

Furthermore, the methodical system is the bearer of what we may call *pitfall-awareness*: it is constructed to prevent certain potentially counterproductive tendencies from dominating the interpretive process. Without this kind of systematic approach, the interpreter will most likely build the interpretation on *initial intuition* about what is important in the text. This will typically draw attention to aspects of the text that lend support to the reader's initial intuition, and this intuition is very often coloured by the concerns that already have a strong grip on the reader's mind. The result is that one will see one's established preoccupations reflected in the text, and the features that point in the opposite direction of such preoccupations can easily escape him or her. The methodical approach seeks to establish a reading practice that acknowledges that every reading will be dependent on the reader having some intuition about what is important in the text,<sup>4</sup> but the reading procedure itself will not be structured by this intuition.

---

3: The list of problems is long. It includes the view of the literary text as essentially an act of communication, the idea of the literary text as a unified whole, the problem of intention, the notion of form involved, the understanding of the relation between theory and method, etc.

4: The reading process which the system suggests takes place within the hermeneutic circle, and is thus predicated upon one's initial understanding of the text.

The system also seeks to make the interpretation as *open to criticism* as possible, preparing the ground for a detailed and comprehensive comparison of different and competing readings. The problem in a scholarly culture without this kind of methodical common ground is that each reading seems to establish its own premises, although exactly what these are and how the interpreter arrived at precisely this conclusion may be very hard to ascertain.

The methodical common ground also makes it possible for several people to work out interpretations together. Sharing a working procedure, we can take all the steps together and discuss every stage. This means that the challenge of producing the best argument to support one's view is placed at the heart of the reading process, and one is continually forced to relate not only to one's own observations and descriptions, but also to those of others.

Will this kind of methodical system give uniformity to the interpretations? Quite to the contrary: The tasks/questions merely indicate which aspects of the text the reader should pay attention to, but say nothing about the terms in which he or she is supposed to respond. This methodical approach means that the particularities of any given text stand a better chance of being grasped by the interpreter.

Another fear is that if all the different interpreters work by the same methodical procedure, we will no longer hear the individual interpreter's own voice. But this is incorrect, for the reason just stated. Using this methodical system, the interpreter will not be relieved of the task of finding the terms in which to respond to the text: That task is left to the interpreter. In responding to the tasks the system sets, the interpreter will need all her linguistic, intellectual, human and moral resources. Indeed, the quality of the interpretation will in most cases, at least in connection with rich and challenging texts, be a real test of one's own competence and intellectual resources. In other words, the interpreter's special qualities or lack of qualities in terms of understanding, perceptivity to details in the textual design, sensitivity to turns of language or storage of historical and philological knowledge relevant for the interpretation of the text in question, will be reflected in the way in which the various tasks are solved in each individual case.

Is such a methodical procedure a prerequisite for the scholarly interpretation of texts? It may be in practice if not in theory: Those of us who are not geniuses may need the assistance of the procedure to recognise all relevant features of the text. On the other hand, it is clearly also insufficient. Exactly because the questions or tasks are given in terms that for the most part do not suggest a set of alternative answers, readers are at the mercy of their own insights, responses and responsiveness in formulating these answers. One's human resources are crucial to the interpretation, as indeed are one's general theoretical and philosophical resources. On the whole I take the opposition between human responsiveness and method to be misleading. This methodical system *requires* such responsiveness; the methodical procedure seeks to assist it, giving it more observations in the text to draw on, and thus seeking to enrich the interpreter's personal involvement with the text.