



The Evolution of Feeling-dominated Response in Norman N. Holland's Theory of Literature

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Early in this essay I unearth a similarity between Norman N. Holland's reader-response theory and responses to literature by the English essayist William Hazlitt, and I briefly trace some similarities and differences between Holland's approach and that of David Bleich and Stanley Fish. Drawing attention to a shift in Holland's work from concern with how we read literature toward questioning why we read literature, I point out that this helps to explain why Holland turned to neuroscience. Referring in particular to more recent essays and to his magnum opus *Literature and the Brain* I argue that Holland's major insights into the question of why we read literature are to be found in what he says about the interplay between the brain's right and left hemispheres. I conclude, however, that such insights also problematize the emphasis on feeling-dominated response that has been a feature of Holland's work since the beginning.

To cite as

Pagan, N.O., 2017, 'The Evolution of Feeling-dominated Response in Norman N. Holland's Theory of Literature', *PsyArt* 21, pp. 115–128.

The fundamental question for those who focus less on works of literature per se and more on how readers respond is reminiscent of the philosophical conundrum about the tree falling in the forest. If there is no one to hear it fall, can the tree be said to make a sound? While American reader-response theorists do not deny the existence of the literary object, they refuse to attribute a power to it that exists in a realm foreign to readers' experience of it. In and of itself a work of literary fiction or a poem consists of mere words. For these theorists, the words only begin to come alive as someone begins to read them. A defining moment for the emergence of American reader-response theory occurred at a famous conference at Johns Hopkins in 1966. During the

discussion session which followed Georg Poulet's presentation of "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" Norman N. Holland stood up and confronted the eminent Belgian critic. "The [literary] work," claimed Holland, "gives us something to create with, but it is not nearly so active as you imply; and you also call it an I, a self, a subject, which again seems to me to suggest more activity than the experiment would indicate" (Poulet 1970, 86). According to Holland, by attributing too much power to the text, Poulet was making the reader far too passive. Indeed, Poulet's model of the literary experience would prove to be very much at odds with what would be the whole thrust of the reader-response theory which was just beginning to emerge in America in the 1960s because as the name implies, the pioneers of American reader-response preferred not to look from text to reader, but from reader to text. In the early parts of his career, Holland had labored under the spell of New Criticism—the understanding of the literary text as sacrosanct and as independent of any authority outside of itself. Gradually however, like fellow reader-oriented theorists David Bleich and Stanley Fish, he switched allegiance from New Criticism to reader-response.¹

Here, after a brief consideration of Holland's ground-breaking early work in reader-response theory, I argue that his approach has an affinity with a way of responding to literature which may be unearthed from the work of the English man of letters, William Hazlitt, writing more than two centuries earlier. Comparing and contrasting Holland's reader-response theory with that of Bleich and Fish, I also draw attention to a shift in Holland's writings from an overarching concern with how we read literature to a questioning of why we read literature. This is part of an attempt to understand why for certain readers a particular poem or work of literary fiction triggers extraordinarily powerful feelings while faced with the same piece of literature other readers can only experience a mind-numbing indifference. Holland's strong desire to answer this question also helps to explain why unlike his fellow American reader-response theorists he turns to neuroscience.

Holland is particularly engaging when he reaches out toward theories concerning the interplay between the human brain's two hemisphere. Bold attempts like this to unlock the secrets of the brain and bring new scientific knowledge to bear especially on the pleasure involved in responding to literature is in keeping with Holland's perennial desire to dissect and analyze. Holland, more than most critics, has never wanted to jettison and has done everything in his power to preserve and even revere responses to literature that

¹ In an email to the author on July 9, 2009 Holland elaborated on the transition from New Criticism to reader response: "I came to feel, when I studied readers, that its basic premise was wrong. That is the New Critics assumed that there was a unitary response determined by the text. Or a desired response to be worked out between student and teacher but determined by the text. When I looked at what actual readers said about actual reading, their associations were far too variable to fit such a model. I became a reader-response critic."

well up from readers' feelings. He never wanted to allow dispassionate intellection and theorizing to win out over our primal need to feel.

Holland, Readers, and Subjectivity

In the late 1960s at the State University of New York at Buffalo Holland began setting up workshops in which students were urged to write down very personal responses to a variety of texts. Known as Delphi seminars--in accordance with the ancient Oracle's injunction "Know thyself"--the seminars were initiated to allow participants to explore their inner selves through an examination of their own and their peers' written responses in preparation for the writing of which they had all been encouraged not to resort to the rationalism that customarily underlies most academic discourse but rather to simply record whatever associations—memories or ideas--came to mind as they worked their way through the weekly readings. Holland and his principal collaborator Murray Schwartz wanted responses to stem from students' feelings, so they insisted: "Feelings should form the basis of your written response. Describe them as best you can." To help participants access and articulate their feelings they were urged to make their responses "free associative" (Holland and Schwartz 1975, 790).

Holland's deployment of the Delphi seminars was very much in keeping with his contention that literary texts exist primarily in the reader as is suggested in publications like *Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature* where he acknowledges the influence of Robert Gorham Davis's insistence that "We speak of being 'absorbed' and 'immersed' in the work, but actually it is the other way around: we take the work into ourselves, introject it" (Holland 1973, 84).² According to Holland, "we take in literary works and make them part of our psychological workings as we make food part of our digestive processes." Holland then envisages a parallel between the reader merging with "the source of gratification" and the "feeding child" merging with the "nurturing mother" (p. 85).

In "Unity Identity Self Text" as Holland employs the code name "DEFT," standing for the "defense-expectation-fantasy-transformation model of the literary experience" (Holland 1975, 818) the placement of "defense" at the beginning suggests that the process is initiated by the literary text. It is only by virtue of the movement through their defense mechanisms that readers, as Holland explains in *Poems in Persons*, can begin to construct the pleasurable fantasies that are the result of "a transformation of unconscious into conscious content that fits [an individual's] lifestyle" (Holland 1973, 83).

² Holland's theory of reading in its early stages resembled that of Louise M. Rosenblatt who coined the term "transactional theory of reading." Her insistence in *Literature as Exploration* that literary response be "unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest" (Rosenblatt 1995, 67) is very much in keeping with the spirit of Holland's Delphi seminars.

For Holland, reading has to be more a matter of “projection” than a matter of “ingestion.” Thus borrowing the notion of an “identity principle” from Heinz Lichtenstein, Holland proceeds to argue that readers project onto the texts they read in accordance with their “identity themes” (Holland and Schwartz 1975, 789). In “Unity Identity Self Text,” having reiterated the notion that “Interpretation is a function of identity,” he claims that “all readers create from the fantasy seemingly ‘in’ the work fantasies to suit their several character structures. Each reader, in effect, re-creates the work in terms of his own identity theme” (Holland 1975, 818). Notice though that he says “seemingly ‘in’ the work” hinting that fantasies can only really exist in the minds of readers.

The idea of transition from ingestion to projection underlies Holland’s contention that as individuals read they inject the text by filtering it through their defense mechanisms, so “the literary experience drops down to ‘deep,’ unconscious levels . . . and there become transformed into the unconscious wish associated with the person’s particular identity theme, a fantasy pushing for gratification, pressing upward toward coherence and significance” (Holland 1975, 818).

Holland describes his model of reading as “transactive” and he employs the term “feedback loops” to denote the movement between “injection” and “projection.” “According to the transactive theory of reading,” states Holland, “. . . reading is a creative process in which . . . subjectivity questions objectivity, thereby enabling objectivity to respond to and shape subjectivity” (Holland 1998, 174).

Around about the same time as Holland and Schwartz were organizing their Delphi seminars, David Bleich was employing a similar approach at Indiana University where as his students read the assigned literature and began to record their reactions, they were encouraged to include any associations that came to mind. The back and forth movement between reader and text in Holland’s model of reading would come to ensure a possible objectivity which would often be missing in Bleich’s work. In *Subjective Criticism*, however, Bleich shares Holland’s view of the reading of literature as both a function of reader subjectivity and a vehicle for growth in a reader’s self-knowledge. “Subjective criticism,” declares Bleich, “assumes that each person’s most urgent motivations are to understand himself . . .” (Bleich 1978, 297); and he goes on to affirm repeatedly that encounters with literature can give readers a better understanding of how they should live and even of what makes their lives worth living. In keeping with Holland’s creed for the Delphi seminars, Bleich claims that “Our minds are built so that knowledge of ourselves is not only possible and desirable, but necessary” and that literature can provide this knowledge.

Considering Holland’s model of individuals reading according to their distinctive “identity themes,” Bleich maintains that such an approach to reader-response does not provide enough opportunities for readers to perceive in

unaccustomed ways. He fears that always condemned to be reading in line with their identity themes, readers in Holland's model will always follow the same path thus perhaps precluding them from experiencing the novelty that is necessary for self-enhancement:

Thus, when a person perceives an experience as, in some important way, a departure from the normal run of experience, he [or she] would if he [or she] accepts this [Holland's] principle, have to understand the new experience as a repetition of previous experiences. (Bleich 1974, 121)

Here Bleich overlooks Holland's insistence that variations are inherent in the concept of identity theme that he borrows from identity-theorist Heinz Lichtenstein and from musical composition. Holland also juggles the word "style" with the word "identity" and contends that "One had a novel experience in the same style as one's earlier experiences." Indeed, Holland cannot be excluding novelty because "the theme persists but the variations are potentially infinite and all new." (Norman Holland, e-mail message to author, January 26, 2009). For Holland readers of literature are constantly gaining new insights into themselves and are not mere prisoners of their own subjectivity.

Holland, Hazlitt, and Spontaneous Response

In his guidelines for the Delphi seminars, Holland (along with Schwartz) encouraged participants (mainly students, but also occasionally a fellow faculty member) to try to capture in prose their deeply felt "spontaneous" emotional reactions that would make their responses quite unlike the more customary "analytical" and "intellectual" responses expected in academia. (Holland and Schwartz 1975, 790).

This use of the word "spontaneous" echoes William Wordsworth's famous description in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" of "poetry" as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1957, 128). Wordsworth continues, ". . . it [poetry] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of re-action, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (pp. 128-29). Wordsworth is of course writing about the writing of poetry, not response to poetry; but the tension between feeling and reason and the contention that the original emotion can be preserved and articulated dovetails with what Holland and Schwartz were trying to get the members of their Delphi seminars to do in a very different context centuries later.

A better historical precedent for the modus operandi of Holland and Schwartz's Delphi seminars may be found in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century writings of the English essayist, journalist, and painter

William Hazlitt who often wrote from the perspective of a reader. Hazlitt's reaction to poems— first Wordsworth's "Betty Foy," then "The Thorn," "The Mad Mother," and "The Complaint of a Poor Indian Woman"--read aloud to him by Coleridge in a park one morning as they sat on the fallen trunk of an ash tree may serve as an example. Recalling this incident in his essay "My First Acquaintance with Poets," Hazlitt writes,

. . . *I felt that deeper power and pathos which have been since acknowledged,*

In spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,

as the characteristics of this author; and the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me. It had to be something of the effect that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of Spring. (Hazlitt 1961, 13-14).

Here by incorporating the line from Alexander Pope, "In spite of pride, in erring reason's spite" and by espousing forces which are able to counter and elude the tyranny of reason Hazlitt shows himself to be an early advocate for the expression of feeling in responding to literature. He conceives of Wordsworth's poems as embodying both a "new style" and fresh feelings like those we experience when we encounter "fresh soil" or "the first welcome breath of Spring."

Hazlitt was also well-known for writing at great speed, for bringing in quotations from memory (obviously looking them up would take unnecessary time), and for rarely indulging in revision. Hazlitt was also not afraid to write about his faults—in "On Depth and Superficiality," for instance, he admits: "I am not, in the ordinary acceptance of the term, a good-natured man," and his penchant for confession would be taken to an extreme in his notorious *Liber Amoris: or, The New Pygmalion*. This recourse to the confessional mode foreshadows the practices of the Delphi seminars whose members were always urged to put "candor . . . above elegance" (Holland and Schwartz 1975, 792) and who in their responses would frequently share very intimate details about their lives.

As Hazlitt listened to Coleridge reciting Wordsworth's poems he could not fail to think of these two poet-friends (Coleridge and Wordsworth) and his thinking of Wordsworth in particular is indicated by his reference to "the characteristics of this author." Hazlitt seems to have been an acquaintance of almost all of the great English authors of his age and he was especially close to John Keats. More importantly his reaching out for the author during the course of his reading may have been in keeping with his German contemporary poet and literary critic J. G. Herder's admonition to readers "rather to read the spirit of the author than the book." For Herder the work of literature and the spirit of the author were so intertwined that he believed that "the farther he [the

reader] penetrates into this [the spirit of the author], the brighter and more coherent does everything become” (qtd. in Abrahms 1953, 236).

It would be a mistake to think of Holland’s reader-response theory as reserving no room for the author. In *Poems in Persons*, he indicates the desirability of “discover[ing] the ways in which the text represents a transformation of fantasy materials by means of adaptive and defensive strategies *for the writer* or for the reader” (Holland 1973, 136; emphasis added). Throughout the whole of the first chapter of *Poems in Persons*, it is the mind of the author (the poet HD) that is paramount, not the reader’s. Elsewhere Holland has endeavored to unearth what he calls “identity themes” for authors ranging from Shakespeare to F. Scott Fitzgerald and George Bernard Shaw.

Holland and Schwartz in their instruction to Delphi seminar participants suggest, “Some people who work with this kind of [reader] response . . . think that the richest, *most feelingful* [responses] are those to significant persons in the respondent’s life: parents, sibs, spouses, lovers, and friends” (Holland and Schwartz 1975, 790; emphasis added). Perhaps they should have included “authors” in the list. Like Hazlitt centuries earlier, Holland (and Schwartz) realized that an individual’s reading of a particular piece of literature might be dominated by his or her deeply felt connectedness with a wide range of others.

Holland’s Search for Neurological Vindication

In the mid-1990s Holland founded and himself began to publish articles in *PsyArt*. This journal gave him an outlet for disseminating short papers in which he could reformulate some of his ideas in the light of exciting contemporary developments in psychiatry and neuroscience.

In “The Neurosciences and the Arts” Holland turns to psychiatrist Leslie Brothers’ *Friday’s Footprint: How Society Shapes the Human Mind* in which Brothers had questioned whether it is right for neuroscientists to consider minds as if they exist in Robinson Crusoe-like isolation from other minds and at the outset, drawing from the findings of scientific studies of monkeys she maintains that the human tendency to exist as members of social groups must be a function of brain mechanisms that we share with other primates (Brothers 1997, 31-32). For Brothers, the human mind is essentially socially-constructed. “Rather than something packed inside a skull, it [mind] is a dynamic entity defined by its transactions with the rest of the world” (p. 146).

As Holland invokes Brothers’ notion of “social brain” to shed light on the “social” situation of people watching plays and films (both of which are forms of literature, according to Holland), and he argues that in theaters audience members introject what they sense is the response of fellow audience members and allow these responses to impinge on their own. Similarly, as we read novels we may be influenced by comments we have heard or read from friends or statements by reviewers or critics. If we are members of a reading group, we may be influenced by input from other members of the group.

In his work in the 1980s Holland had assigned a role for community in the context of feedback loops.³ Holland, however, does not need to turn to neuroscience to link the reading of literature to some form of group behavior, and this theory already appears in the work of Bleich and in even more detail Fish.

Bleich had entitled one section of *Readers and Feelings Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* “Interpretation as a Communal Act.” In this section not only does he explain how he would get his students to appreciate the necessity for students “. . . to make public use of knowledge derived from response and private reading experiences” (Bleich 1974, 103), but he also implies that individual readers were never really isolated from other readers. The latter was inherent in the kinds of questions that he made his students consider: for example, they needed to consider to what extent they were influenced by a teacher and he would ask them questions like “How does each member of the class use the opinions of all the others?” or “What does the act of telling others do to your sense of the original experience?” or “What effect might the opinions of unfamiliar peers (classmates) have on your own reading experiences?” and “When you are in a discussion, do you feel that ‘everybody else’ is one group and you are in another?” (pp.104-105). The key point was that the knowledge that a reader may acquire through (re)reading a literary text occurs not just by virtue of interaction between individual and text but also as a consequence of individual participation in forms of community both inside and outside the classroom.

In *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* Fish insisted that an individual reader is always part of “a community of readers” (Fish 1980, 109). Although some had interpreted him to be saying that the literary text is as empty as a *tabula rasa*, Fish responded by insisting that a literary text is imbued with crucial “directions . . . for executing interpretive strategies,” but he also insisted that these “directions” “will only be directions to those who already have the interpretive strategies in the first place” (p. 173). It is for Fish a short step from these “interpretive strategies” to “interpretive communities” because as he says, “The very existence of the ‘marks’ [strategies] is a function of an interpretive community, for they will be recognized (that is, made) only by its members” (p. 173). Fish maintains that only groups are able to provide some “stability of interpretation” (p. 171) and thus some objectivity--if members of particular communities have already taken shared interpretive strategies on board before they begin their reading. For Fish readers do not always have to belong to the same interpretive community. They can leave one community and join another at any time as they pick up different “interpretive strategies.” Readers are not born with these strategies; they have to learn them. “What is acquired,” says Fish, “are the

³ See chapter 9, “The Model,” in Holland 1992, 48-57.

ways of interpreting, and those same ways can also be forgotten or supplanted, or complicated or dropped from favor (“no one reads that way anymore”)” (p. 173).⁴

The concept of “social brain” is less obviously relevant to Holland’s work. Even the title of one of his books from the early 1990s *The Critical I* suggests that primacy is given to the individual although Holland had already indicated in, for example, *The Brain of Robert Frost: Cognitive Approach to Literature* (1988) that he had never intended to suggest that reading could be entirely personal. In *The Brain of Robert Frost* he had attempted to explain the process of reading in terms of a hierarchy where “higher-level processes direct lower-level processes” (Holland 1988, 110) and where the individual both initiates and is affected by identity-governing feedback loops. Crucially, these loops include the individual’s “internalized culture” which in turn is a product of “codes” and “canons.” Although in different ways all three theorists—Bleich, Fish, and Holland—were trying to draw attention to shared culturally-conditioned aspects of reading within each individual reader-response, only Fish’s model of “interpretive communities” would receive much critical traction. Holland’s model of feedback loops did not catch on, nor did it position itself smoothly in relation to the neuroscience which he was trying to bring into the conversation.

In another article in *PsyArt*, “Literature and Happiness,” continuing to look for neurological explanation for the experience of reading literature, Holland turns to neuropsychologist Jaak Panksepp’s delineation of a “SEEKING system” allegedly located in the midbrain in the ventral tegmental area. As we begin to read a poem or novel, according to Holland, our “SEEKING system” exclaims: “I think something good is going to happen here. I feel anticipation, interest, excitement . . .” and “as I begin to find out what is happening in the next line of the poem or chapter of the novel . . . I feel ‘flow’” and I am at least temporarily fulfilled because, as Holland puts it, “the faint puzzle is solved.”

In *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience* neuropsychologists Mark Solms and Oliver Turnbull compare the actions of the seeking system to “foraging,” but they also argue that it is never clear what the SEEKING system is actually seeking—“All that it seems to know is that the ‘something’ it wants is ‘out there’” (Solms and Turnbull 2005, 118). They claim that the influence of the system is particularly active in cases of “sexual arousal and other appetitive states (e.g., hunger, thirst, or craving a cigarette).” The SEEKING system may be useful in terms of helping to explain the reading of literature as involvement in behavior that resembles “foraging,” but are these forms of arousal and appetitive cravings

⁴ Fish also claims that literature itself should be understood in the light of the notion of “interpretive community” as what constitutes “literature” must involve “a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers (it is very much an act of faith) continues to abide by it” (Fish 1980, 109).

analogous to states experienced by readers of literature? The system is also associated with “some forms of aggression (especially the predatory variety, known as ‘cold’ aggression).”⁵ At no point does Holland try to link reading literature with predatory instincts or incipient violence.

Holland’s most potentially fruitful attempt to embrace neuroscience to shed light on literary response and the broader question “Why literature?” may be found in his *Literature and the Brain* in which he discusses the brain’s right and left hemispheres. This is a potentially very fruitful avenue of inquiry, but it is important to bear in mind from the outset, as Solms and Turnbull point out, that left brain/right brain dichotomies should not be considered absolute. “[A]lmost all mental functions,” they insist, “incorporate functional contributions from *both* cerebral hemispheres” (p. 244).

Scientific evidence for distinctions between the two hemispheres was made available in particular by studies of patients who were victims of damage to one hemisphere or the other. One of the most famous cases was provided by French anthropologist and physician Pierre Paul Broca in the 1860s who, when studying the autopsy of a man (nicknamed “Tan Tan” because he could only say “tan”) who had lost the ability to produce meaningful speech, found that by far the most extensive damage was to the left frontal lobe. This led Broca to surmise that this area of the brain represented the “seat” of language.” Following the work of Broca it became customary to associate “*language*” with the left hemisphere and “*spatial cognition*” with the right. In *A Whole New Mind: Why Right- Brainers will Rule the Future* Daniel H. Pink captures this well when he says that “the right hemisphere is the picture; the left hemisphere is the thousand words” (Pink 2005, 19).

In the 1950s Roger W. Sperry, who (along with colleagues David H. Hubel and Torsten N. Wiesel) would win a Nobel Prize for his work on split/brain research, began to challenge the traditional view that the more instinctive and nonlinear right hemisphere was inferior to the more rational and analytic left hemisphere. He claimed that,

The so-called subordinate or minor hemisphere, which we had formerly supposed to be illiterate and mentally retarded and thought by some authorities to be not even conscious, was found in fact to be the superior cerebral member when it came to performing certain kinds of mental tasks. (Sperry 1981, 13)

Sperry argued that while the left hemisphere was indeed adept at handling reasoning and sequential analysis, only the right hemisphere has the ability to think holistically and register distinctive patterns.

As Pink points out, the move to give more influence to the right hemisphere was taken even further by specialist in behavioral neuroscience Neil R. Carson

⁵ The features of the SEEKING system here are listed in Solms and Turnbull 2002, 115-16.

who believed that he had shown that the right hemisphere “is specialized in seeing many things at once: in seeing all the parts of a geometric shape and grasping its form, or in seeing all the elements of a situation and understanding what they mean” (qtd. in Pink 2005, 19).⁶

Holland may be given credit for being the first to try to relate the distinctive features of the two hemispheres to literary response. Crucially, he does not accept Broca’s idea that verbal abilities are exclusively a function of the left hemisphere. This has implications in terms of locating the literary. Holland does not want to suggest that engagement with the “literary” can be neatly confined to the left side especially because he is also keenly aware of studies that have shown contra-Broca that the right hemisphere is also to some extent concerned with the verbal.

Thus, Holland stresses that although both sides handle words, they do so in radically different ways. Holland argues that although on the one hand thinking dominated by the left side of the brain may be logical and sequential and necessary (for example, if we are to follow the sequence of events that constitute a novel’s plot), on the other hand because this side of the brain is more attuned to “plain” or “literal” sense, it cannot cope with more “poetic” or “literary” language. Stalled in literalness, then, the left hemisphere is quite blind to the less than logical displays of language that are a function of the right hemisphere. (Holland 2009, 180, 192-93) According to Holland, “when a word is presented, the right hemisphere activates a wider range of meanings than the left hemisphere does” and “the right hemisphere develops meanings that are less ‘salient,’ that is less obvious or less likely to come first to mind” (p. 194). Holland argues that

the left hemisphere . . . rapidly commits to one particular meaning that fits with . . . the plain sense. The left hemisphere actively suppresses the rest of the meanings. By contrast the right hemisphere keeps those tentative meanings around for a measurable interval of time. (p. 195)

When reading a novel, those inclined to think with the left side of the brain will not tend to dwell on the possible ambiguity of particular words and will leap without hesitation from the words on the page to “realistic statements about the world” (p. 196). In marked contrast, readers dominated by activity in the right side of the brain will tend to be circumspect, more open, more comfortable with ambiguity, and less inclined to jettison possible meanings (p. 195).

⁶ Pink equates the differences between the two hemispheres with different ways of thinking—“Left-Directed Thinking” and “Right-Directed Thinking”—and examines the consequences for human beings today both in their everyday and in their working lives. He maintains that “Both halves [of the brain] play a role in nearly everything we do,” but that in certain situations one hemisphere is more active than the other (Pink 2005, 17).

In keeping with the conventional view of the left side as analytical and the right side as more in tune with emotions, Holland insists that “the right hemisphere matters more than the left in the emotional processing of language” (p. 196). He believes that the right hemisphere is far more adept at “interpreting ambiguous words, indirect requests (like ‘Can you take out the trash?’), connotations, metaphors, idioms, sarcasm, and jokes.” “To me,” continues Holland, “these things imply literature” (p. 197). Later he says that “[W]hen we considered what makes language ‘literary,’ we saw that spreading activation in the right hemisphere elicits more unusual associations and a larger spread of meanings than words presented only to the left” (p. 275).

If we can agree with his claim that the right hemisphere can cope with the ambiguity of language and at the same time allow a person to surrender to or be “transported” by the emotion of the moment, we can also speculate that the impulses underlying the models of the literary experience articulated by Holland are also associated predominantly with the brain’s right hemisphere. If the key to unlocking the mystery of literature’s appeal has to do with emotion this may even be compatible with the Delphi seminar’s creed “Know thyself,” at least, if we agree with Pink that the emotional appeal of (literary) narratives conflates with the human desire for self-knowledge. (p. 115)

It is possible that here Holland has found an explanation for why some are drawn to literature, or at least, literary language and others are not. Lovers of literature may be thought of as overwhelmingly right- rather than left-brain oriented. At the same time, Holland makes it very clear that those drawn to literature cannot be exclusively right-brain oriented. The left hemisphere also has a crucial role to play, especially in establishing what Holland calls the plain sense of a literary work, but the right hemisphere enables the opening up a space for the more than mundane levels of imagination and creativity, which surely lie far closer to the heart of those who really appreciate literature. As aficionados of literature may be thought of as enjoying the often tantalizingly elusive nature of literary language and railing against the rigidity of superficial meaning, the right hemispheres of their brains may be imagined to be protesting against their left hemisphere’s dogged insistence on the literal.

Holland’s reader-response theory’s emphasis on feelings and pleasure may now be thought of as compatible to a large extent with the activity of neurons firing in the brain’s right hemisphere. The claim that “the right hemisphere matters more than the left in the emotional processing of language” (p. 196) dovetails well with Holland’s privileging the feeling-dominated response throughout his career. According to Holland, as we read literature, first we feel and then we think: “We enjoy and then we deliberately and separately think about what we have enjoyed” (p. 340). Although Holland believes that neuroscience supports this distinction as “the thinking parts of our brains (frontal and cortical) are separate from the enjoying (sub-cortical) parts” (p. 340); neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* provides evidence to support the idea that feelings and

reason are in fact intertwined. For Damasio, “the brain systems required by the former [feelings] are enmeshed in those needed by the latter [reason] . . .” (Damasio 2006, 245). I must end then with a note of caution. Holland’s feeling-dominated theory of literature may in fact never have been as feeling-dominated as he doubtless desired it to be.

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