



NYRblog : Roving thoughts and provocations from our writers

## Why Readers Disagree

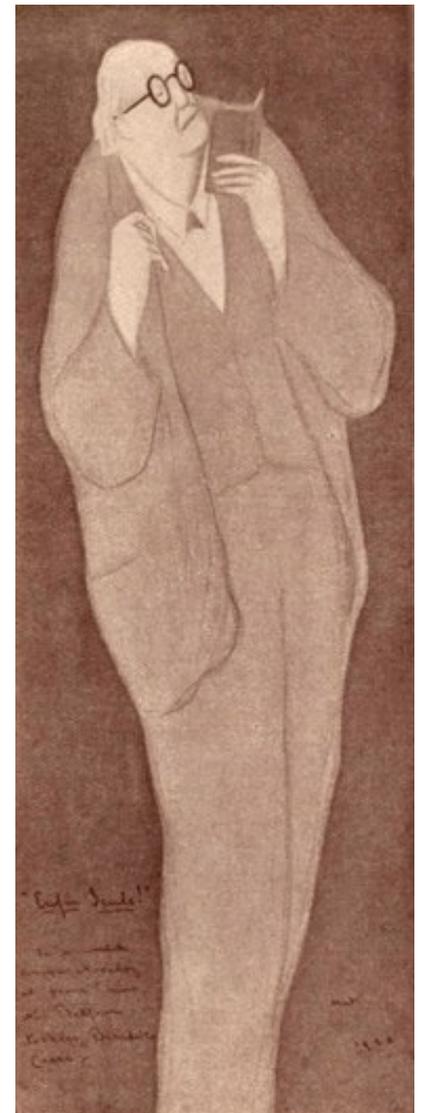
Tim Parks

“I love the new DeLillo.”  
“And I hate it.”

It’s a familiar conversation: like against dislike with no possible resolution. Or alternatively: “I can’t see why *Freedom* upsets you so much. I didn’t like it either, but who cares?” Interest against disinterest; as when your wife/brother/friend/colleague raves about some Booker or Pulitzer winner and you feel vaguely guilty. “Sure,” you agree, “great writing, intriguing stuff.” But the truth is you just couldn’t find the energy to finish the book.

So, is there anything we can say about such different responses? Or must we just accept *De gustibus non disputandum est*? The fact is that traditional critical analysis, however brilliant, however much it may help us to understand a novel, rarely alters the color of our initial response. Enthusiasm or disappointment may be confirmed or attenuated, but only exceptionally reversed. We say: James Wood/Colm Toibin/Michiko Kakutani admires the book and has given convincing reasons for doing so, but I still feel it is the worst kind of crowd-pleaser.

Let me offer a possible explanation that has been developing in my mind over a decade and more. It’s a central tenet of systems-based psychology that each personality develops in the force field of a community of origin, usually a family, seeking his or her own



Max Beerbohm

*'In a world comparatively at peace now, Mr. Balfour tackles Benedetto Croce.'*

position in a pre-existing group, or “system,” most likely made up of mother, father, brothers and sisters, then aunts, uncles, grandparents, and so on. The leading Italian psychologist, Valeria Ugazio, further suggests that this family “system” also has “semantic content”; that is, as conversations in the family establish criteria for praise and criticism of family members and non-members, one particular theme or issue will dominate.

In my family, for example, the quality that mattered most was never courage or independence, success or community spirit, but goodness, usually understood as renunciation. My father was an evangelical clergyman and both parents were involved in the Charismatic Movement. Every person, every political issue, was understood in terms of good and evil. In another family, appraisal might revolve chiefly around, say, the courage and independence someone has shown, or the extent to which another person is timorous and dependent. In such a family it’s a fair bet that one member will have shown a remarkable spirit of adventure while another rarely takes risks of any kind.

That is—according to Ugazio’s theory—family members tend to manifest the qualities, positive and negative, around which the group’s conversations revolve. So it was that at a certain point in his adolescence my brother made a great show of being “evil” in the terms my parents understood the word: he grew his hair long, drank, smoked dope, locked himself in his room with cute girlfriends, and even told us, with a fair parody of a malignant grin, that he was demonic. As the youngest of three, I found my own adolescence shaped by constant parental pressure to choose between my “bad” brother and “good” sister who played the guitar in church and dressed with exemplary propriety.

Each developing family member, this theory suggests, will be looking to find a stable position within the polarized values the family is most concerned with. Persons who for some reason find this difficult, perhaps drawn emotionally one way and intellectually another, might eventually develop symptoms of psychological unease; they cannot figure out where they stand in the group; which, in a family, might not be far from saying, they don’t quite know who they are.

In her remarkable book *Permitted and Forbidden Stories, Semantic Polarities and Pathologies in the Family*, which should soon be appearing in English, Ugazio offers examples of this process from celebrated novels: all members of the Karamazov family, she points out, can be understood by placing them on the good-evil axis: the wicked

Dimitri, the saintly Alyosha, and the more complex and untrustworthy Ivan who oscillates between the extremes. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, on the other hand, the characters are fearful or reckless, patient or courageous, pusillanimous or bold. Of course they have other qualities too; they are complex, fully-drawn people, but it is their position along the fear-courage axis that is decisive as the plot unfolds. Moral issues in Thomas Hardy's work usually present themselves in the form: Do I have the courage/recklessness to break this conventional moral rule?

When writing reviews I have occasionally used this kind of approach to help me get a fix on a writer. Reading through scores of Chekhov's stories recently it became clear that the key issue throughout was belonging: do I belong, the characters ask themselves, to this family/institution/social class, or don't I? Am I excluded from this relationship, am I merely trapped in this marriage? Most of the central characters display an ambivalence as to whether they want to be part of the group or not: or rather, they want to be part, but then feel diminished by this belonging; they need to feel superior to the group or relationship as well as being in it, they need to escape, but if they do, they are immediately anxious to return.

So far so good. But let's take the argument a little further than Ugazio does. Systems theorists (or "positioning theorists" as more recent jargon would have it) see people as constantly taking the position developed within the family out into the larger world. Some of them go so far as to say that identity is no more (no less!) than the position one consistently adopts, or seeks to adopt, in each new situation. As a result misunderstandings may occur—at work perhaps, or in a newly formed couple—between people who have grown up with quite different criteria for assessing behavior. Hence expressions like: "I don't know where she's coming from"; "He really doesn't get it, does he?"

Could not something of the same failure of two psyches to mesh occur between writers and readers? Or alternatively, might not the psyche of writer and reader mesh all too powerfully, but in quarrel rather than harmony?

For example, not only does a writer like Chekhov focus constantly on issues of belonging and escape, but he does so in such a way as to invite our sympathy for the complex behavioral strategy that he personally always adopted: an attitude of generous involvement with others while nevertheless safeguarding absolute independence and retaining a certain separateness and superiority. Many of Chekhov's stories, about people unhappily trapped in relationships on the one hand, or totally excluded from

their peer groups on the other, might be read as warnings to himself (the author) not to change this strategy. Not all readers will connect with this.

Or we might consider Thomas Hardy and D H Lawrence. Like Hardy, Lawrence's writing is extremely sensitive to issues of fear and courage. In *Sons and Lovers* the moral veto that Miriam places on sex before marriage is "unmasked" by her boyfriend Paul as merely fear finding an alibi in moral convention. In an extremely bold move Paul declares fear to be the evil, not sex. Victorian morality is turned on its head; for those in love, Paul insists, making love is a *moral* imperative. Fear is a betrayal of life. While writing this novel, we recall, the author ran off with a married woman, encouraging her to abandon her husband and three young children.

Reading Lawrence's strange *Study of Thomas Hardy*, we can see that he was intensely locked into Hardy's imaginative world; the two of them shared the same need to find a position over issues of fear (one thinks of a poem like "Snake"). But what Lawrence hated in Hardy was that his characters so often choose not to be courageous, or when they are bold and defy convention the gesture is presented as merely reckless and they are destroyed by it. He must always "stand with the average against the exception," Lawrence complains. It is as if Hardy were constantly reminding himself through his writing of all the reasons why he had stayed so long in an unhappy marriage and why he always made a point of being seen in church even if he didn't believe in God.

It's interesting that in his time Hardy's novels were severely criticized for being immoral, because he suggested that society's crushing of sinners and above all adulterers was cruel. Today there is no such criticism and we all (excluding, perhaps, evangelicals like my parents) side gladly with Tess, Jude, and Hardy's many other victims of Victorian severity. We have a different take on life because we grew up in different systems. Lawrence, on the other hand, has enjoyed no such turn around in reader response. He is so forthright as a storyteller, so determined to have his way, and so blithely unconcerned when a pusillanimous character is brushed aside by anyone who has the courage to live life to the full; one thinks of poor Banford in *The Fox*, dispatched without pity because she stands in the way of Henry and March's marriage, or indeed of Professor Weekley himself, whom Lawrence deprived of an extraordinary wife.

What I'm suggesting then is that much of our response to novels may have to do with the kind of "system" or "conversation" we grew up in and within which we had to find a position and establish an identity. Dostoevsky is always and immediately enthralling

for me. The question of whether and how far to side with good or evil, with renunciation or indulgence, grabs me at once and takes me straight back to my adolescence. And how I loathe the end of his books where the sinner repents and gets on his knees and sees the error of his ways in an ecstasy of self-abasement. I love Dostoevsky, but I argue furiously with him. Same with an author like Coetzee in *Disgrace*. I feel locked into the same conversation. Beyond any question of “liking” these books are important to me.

On the other hand, when I read, say, the Norwegian writer, Per Petterson, who again is chiefly concerned with fear, vulnerability to the elements and the terror of being abandoned by those we have most trusted, I immensely admire his writing, but find it hard to care. When asked on two occasions to review Petterson I read every word carefully and with pleasure and gave the novels the praise they very much deserve, but I wouldn't go out of my way to read another book of his. His world, the disturbing imagery he draws on, the rhythm and pacing of his sentences, are far removed from my concerns. Affinities, as Goethe tells us, are important. Few works of art can have universal appeal.

Perhaps this was what I was getting at when I suggested some time ago that a reader's decision not to finish a novel need not be considered a damning criticism. Speaking of which, many years ago, after my own novel *Europa*, already published in England, was submitted for US publication to Doubleday, I received from Nan Talese one of those rejection letters that no writer can easily forget. *Europa* is an obsessive, rancorous, but I hope entertaining account of one man's dealings with disappointed love, the protagonist always painfully aware that he shouldn't be complaining because the love in question was an affair in which he had been betraying his wife. Questions of good and evil, renunciation and indulgence. She could understand, Talese responded, wrongly assuming the book was literally autobiographical, why someone might need to write such a thing, but she could not imagine why anyone would ever want to read it. Days later it was shortlisted for the Booker prize. This talented editor simply wasn't in the same conversation. Fortunately for me a couple of members of the Booker jury were.

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