
Forum

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A Theory of Resonance

To the Editor:

As someone who has been working toward a cognitive model of interpretation, I celebrate the appearance of Wai Chee Dimock's article on resonance in *PMLA* as a sign that interdisciplinary work beyond the borders of our neighboring humanist disciplines is moving into the mainstream of literary scholarship ("A Theory of Resonance," 112 [1997]: 1060–71). Dimock uses the hypothesis that noise enhances the strength of a signal as an analogy or a metaphor ("resonance") for her beautifully written and entirely convincing claim that the changed meaning of a literary text over time according to the changing contexts of its readers is precisely its strength, indeed its "democracy" (1068).

In *Gaps in Nature: Literary Criticism and the Modular Mind* (State U of New York P, 1993), I discussed historical change in various kinds of interpretation using a different set of cognitive terms and coming to a similar conclusion about the dimensions of change. My comments here arise, thus, not from any disagreement with Dimock's conclusions but rather from the slippage in her argument between the logical implications of the empirical study she introduces and its power as analogy. Recognizing parallels between traditional literary ways of thinking and empirical scientific work, especially work that explores the ways in which our bodies and minds are evolved to produce and function within culture, is certainly to be encouraged. But the merely metaphoric use of the notions of sound, noise, and resonance doesn't allow Dimock to accomplish what she claims to do—namely, to distinguish a literary text from any object meaning or any word meaning, either of which would fit equally well the description of the literary text she suggests: "A literary text is a prime example of an object that is not individuated as a fixed set of attributes within fixed coordinates. [. . .] The attributes of a text continually emerge. Not a finished product, a text is the incomplete expression of a finite language user [. . .] a collective potentiality, a force of incipience commensurate with the incipience of humanity" (1064).

Until we are able to sort out the metaphors about cognition from the functional consequences of (say) brain structure in the interpretation of texts, the theoretical statement produced remains, as Dimock's does, at such a high level of abstraction as to be a truism—elegantly expressed but already expressed, as she herself notes, citing Bakhtin and Einstein, and she might have cited Wittgenstein as well. Neither is it news that "literary texts are to be cherished for the

likelihood that they will arrive at new and strange junctures and yield new and strange arguments” (1065). Literary texts, in other words, have to pass the test of time. Even after literary texts have proved themselves, however, Dimock’s theory of resonance, because it is, as metaphor, plastic, won’t be able to distinguish the cultural values of the texts from those other valued items of culture whose values are periodically reinvented: a Rembrandt painting, a Bach concerto, or a string of pearls. (I would distinguish here between reinterpreted value and continuous value; a cooking pot or a warm coat would be in the second category.)

Just how adaptable her metaphor is can be seen from the comparison she presents at the end of her essay between two readings of *Billy Budd*. The first reader (Howard Vincent) responds, as she claims, to aural stimuli, the meanings of words dragged in by phonetic parallels. But in her second example (by Eve Sedgwick), the “ear” is now a metaphor: there is no evidence that readers don’t bypass the sounds of the words entirely, connecting shapes to meanings. Unless Dimock is proposing that reading always includes at least phantom phonological construction, there is no reason to assume any aural resonance here. But this is an empirical question, amenable to testing; we needn’t guess whether all or some readers can reach meaning directly from the visual input, by-passing phonetic representation.

I am not suggesting we abandon a powerful metaphor when we have one, but we should try to keep clear when it is used as a metaphor and when it is used as an empirical description of sense perception from which one may infer function within a specific context. A way to both use and limit the power of the metaphor and thus to get a fix on how readers make sense (and changing sense) of texts is to pose the question in terms of the brain’s internal competition among structures of sense representation. Dimock might have described the “noise” (in a metaphoric sense) that “boosts the threshold of detectability” (also in a metaphoric sense) for Sedgwick as coming not from the sounds or phonology of specific words but from the cultural uses of another kind of human sense knowledge—namely, our kinesic-sexual awareness. This bodily awareness is the basis for some of the judgments we make about ourselves and others, which judgments are then shaped by properties and values of the cultural context. For example, “I am fat” and “I am peculiar” are self-judgments made on the basis of kinesic sense perception (wordless, bodily) within a context of cultural noise (rhetorical, metaphoric).

Dimock’s theory of resonance, thus, is promoted to a rhetorical theory, and the empirical evidence of noise in aural perception fits under it as one kind of bodily

knowledge, among others. Different senses produce different kinds of knowledge, which are differently valued in different contexts; resistance or noise is important, but what counts as noise changes. With this distinction in place, we are in a position to advance the discussion by asking (for example), What is the equivalent of noise in the kinesic system? What, in that system, enhances the detectability of information from it? This is now both an empirically and a rhetorically interesting question. It allows us to ask, further, How do writers and readers take advantage of systems of cognition to make meaning?

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Reply:

Ellen Spolsky highlights a domain of inquiry that seems to me both exciting and worrisome. Cognitive science—a heady brew of linguistics, neurology, and evolutionary biology—studies language as an empirically testable phenomenon, based on brain functions and to be investigated within the laboratory. Its ambition, as stated by Steven Pinker, is to “offer something different from the airy platitudes—Language Lite—that typify discussions of language (generally by people who have never studied it) in the humanities and sciences alike” (*The Language Instinct* 8). This new development has largely been overlooked in literary studies. *Mind* has become an antiquated word within our profession, even as it has become the rallying cry for many outside it.

In the next century, the division of labor within the academy is likely to favor aggressive new disciplines, such as cognitive science, at the expense of the traditional humanities. In anticipation, I would like to urge upon literary studies a new interest in the empirical, but an “empirical” broader in scope and more complexly relayed than is possible within the natural sciences. The laboratory tests that Spolsky would like to see—neurological tests that establish the visual and aural perception in various readers—would indeed try to furnish some hard-hitting evidence. But such evidence (if available) would not translate, directly and automatically, into a literary theory, a theory with an unproblematic claim to the empirical. On the contrary, as Thomas Kuhn has forcefully reminded us, every theory is mediated by its own paradigmatic language and, thus mediated, can aspire to no more than a reasonable proximity to its described object. Every theory, however empirical its genesis, must remain “metaphoric” in its articulation, must labor under the constraints of semantics.