REASONS TO READ: BORROWING FROM PSYCHOLOGY, COGNITIVE AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

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CRISIS
Narratives of ‘CRISIS’

“il y a une parfum de crise”
Breakdown of “Grand Narratives”?

an “incredulity toward metanarratives”

F.S. Michaels – Monoculture. How One Story is Changing Everything
Many Root Causes, Many Narratives

- Financial/Political: Reforms, Cutbacks
- Economic: Neoliberal Capitalism
- Institutional: Tenure
- Social: Decreasing importance of Humanities
- Ideological: Blaming Postmodernism, Cultural relativism
- Technological: Information Age, Internet, New Media
- Generational: “today’s youth....”
“What is an epistemological crisis? ... What [people] took to be evidence pointing unambiguously in some one direction now turns out to have been equally susceptible of rival interpretations. Such a discovery is often paralysing ... the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him ... But happily we do possess one classic study of such crises. It is Shakespeare’s Hamlet.”

- Alasdair Macintyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science” (1977)
Getting Out of Crisis

“epistemological progress consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives and forms of narrative and ... epistemological crises are occasions for such reconstruction”

This new sense of narrative cohesion could “[enable] the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The [original narrative] is itself now made into the subject of an enlarged narrative”
What are the "old" narratives on why and how we read?

Has the import of insight from psychology and psychoanalysis, theories of cognition and evolutionary theory engendered new narratives?

Are there similarities between the older "humanistic" and the newer "scientific" reasons?
Data Collection

200+ books ... and growing

http://www.worldcat.org/profiles/Geert_VDM/lists/2560861

Year Range: 2000 – 2011

Topics: function of literature, literary institutions (library, university, ...), the future of the novel, ...
How to Order?

Publications are part of traditions of conflicts about certain topics

Reconstruct the Conversation

A tradition “embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings.”

- Alasdair MacIntyre,
  “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science”
Method

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY CONVERSATIONS / ARGUMENTS
“Conversations have storylines and the positions people take in a conversation will be linked to these storylines.”

– Harré & Van Langenhove, Positioning Theory, p. 17

“allows the people involved to negotiate new positions and so establish new storylines implemented through newly recognized social acts.”

– Harré & Van Langenhove, Positioning Theory, p. 10
Reasons to Read ...

in Institutions

THE CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND TEACHING LITERATURE
Crisis in Humanities vs. Death of the Book
The general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country, involving different areas and taking on different forms.”

- Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”, 1958
“Too many observers now describe the current state of higher education, particularly of the humanities, as a crisis. I wish instead to characterize it as an ongoing set of problems, a distinction that might at first appear only to be semantic. The terms of the so-called crisis, from the academic humanist perspective, are always the same: corporate interests and values are poised to overwhelm the ideals of the liberal arts and to transform the university into a thoroughly businesslike workplace” (1)
Repeating the Same Story?
“In contemporary America as in Ancient Athens, liberal education is changing” (p. 2)

“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. [...] No, I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education.” (p. 1)
“Has the hypochondriac finally come down with a life-threatening disease?”

- Daniel A. Bell, “Reimaging the Humanities” (2010), p. 69
Enlarged Narrative: Across the curriculum

Pleading for the humanities across the curriculum
Harvard University Course – *A Literature of Social Reflection*

“how literature can help us reflect on a broad range of social issues” (p. xxiii)
Undergraduate course “Rites of Passage” (Brown University)

“One of my chief reasons for teaching this course is to urge students to realize that their own experience of growing up is – surprisingly, rewardingly-mirrored in books from other time, other places.” (Weinstein 2011, p. xiii)
Reasons to Read ... in Humanistic Terms

THE MANY USES OF READING
TAXONOMY OF CLAIMS

- Corruption and Distraction
- Catharsis
- Personal Well-Being
- Education and Self-Development
- Moral Improvement and Civilisation
- Political Instrument
- Social Stratification and Identity Construction
- Autonomy of the Arts and Rejection of Instrumentality
“Crisis”: How do we Use Literature?

Over-emphasis on critical reading in academia

– Alienation of the ‘normal’ reader
“it calls on us to engage seriously with **ordinary motives** for reading – such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape – that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship.” (p. 14)
1 - Recognition
2 - Enchantment
3 - Knowledge
4 - Shock
“many readers in the United States today treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy. They choose books that will offer strategies for confronting, understanding, and managing their personal problems.” (p. 1)
Reasons to Read...

COGNITIVE, PSYCHOLOGICAL & EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES
Literature and Science have Grown Apart

C.P. Snow, The Two Cultures
Empirical Research: greeted with scepticism

On both sides of the Atlantic, the notions of "system" and "empirical" - the latter particularly so [...] evoke the criticism of neo-positivism, the accusation of "number crunching," the criticism of disregard for the primary properties of a literary text, [...] The argumentation that all these and other criticisms - mostly knee-jerk criticisms ... - are based on misunderstandings”

-Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application, p. 2
Subtitle: Experiments examining the effects of reading literature on social perception and moral self-concept

Research Questions still start from “traditional” literary questions (e.g. Nussbaum, Rorty, ...)
Two “New” Enlarged Narratives

Why Stories? Function of Stories?

Cognition/Psychology & Evolution
“This is what my book does. It makes a case for admitting the recent findings of cognitive psychologists into literary studies by showing how their research into the ability to explain behavior in terms of the underlying states of mind—or mind-reading ability—can furnish us with a series of surprising insights into our interaction with literary texts.”
• Understanding Others, Entering their Minds
• Understanding Relationships
• Dynamics of Interaction in Groups
• Problems of Selhood
“Enchanting or transporting literary reading temporarily blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, between self and other, between inner and outer experience, and so it calls for readers to enter a state that resembles that of early self-formation in which the boundaries of the self are more malleable. ... An understanding of self-formation based in object relations theory forms the core of this conception of literature’s value, and so further elaboration of this capacity of literary reading requires a closer look at the work of D.W. Winnicott and others using his ideas.” (Bruns, p. 26)
“why has the richest explanatory story of all, the theory of evolution by natural selection, been so little used to explain why and how stories matter?” (p. 1)
“when we experience anxiety we feel compelled to resolve it, and this resolution often involves the creation of a narrative; the narratives that we generate do not always have to be true in order to respond successfully to anxiety—in many cases, counterfactual narratives work better than the truth; the “useful fictions” humans evolved to create in response to anxiety” (p. xv-xvi)
A Narrative for our Anxiety

“Converting the sound that we hear into a very simple sequence – “a tiger who wants to eat me is over there” – engages our cognitive capacity for creating narratives” (p. 55)

“to create a narrative that can guide our response” (p. 56)
Cognitive, Psychological, Evolutionary Approaches to literature

- New metaphors: re-description
- Link to traditional questions
- Deepening
- Enlarged/More adequate narrative