Games of Chance, Games of Choice

GORDON M. PRADL

It seems as though we've become a nation of bettors. Why? I'll even wager you that before long lottery fever will force our legislators to set up a drawing at the national level. Yes, no doubt about it, a federal lottery is just around the corner. If organized crime can turn a tidy profit by exploiting our proclivity to roll the dice, why shouldn't our elected officials book passage on the same gravy train. In one sense, we all think we know what's going to happen next—the latest weather forecasts, from pork bellies to everyone's wisdom about the direction of AT&T, you place your bet and wait to see if that unboundedly random process can be overturned. The Blue Jays are finally going to win the big one this year, of course, and even Reagan will beat the odds to be elected for a third term and, naturally, my social security number divided by my birth date plus the number of grey hound dogs parked on our street list Thursday at 3:50 pm is the next batch that's coming down.

But stop for a moment. If we decide not to go with this flow, not to join the queue at the win, place, or show window forming to the right, we may be labeled crazy (perhaps un-American). Yet in refusing the sure thing, and being labeled crazy, we are actually speaking out against the increasing irrationality that seems to be overtaking our American commercial society. To take some examples: things like psychic surgery are on the rise, some employers are hiring people on the basis of their horoscope readings not their true qualifications, and we find detectives relying on psychic mediums rather than following regular, if tedious, investigation procedures. Indeed recently a jury even awarded a psychic more than one million dollars damages in her claim that a cat scan had drained her of her special powers.

The reasons for these endless delusions of reason, are no doubt numerous, if they can even be identified. Yet whether they appear as an increasing fascination with the occult, or the rise in prejudice and bigotry amid a climate of anti-intellectualisation, the phenomena must be particularly disturbing to those of us who champion the literary transaction. We are disturbed because it is the literary transaction that we believe to serve the world of pure chance being denied, while what is expanded is the domain of human choice. As relativists, for we are, having taken on the mantle of English teachers, irrational behaviour is enough to turn us prematurely grey. Why can't people learn from the past, without wildly overestimating their future?
The three men here can serve many purposes in helping us to explore our moral universe, including asking the important political-economic question about why illiteracy thrives in an otherwise advanced civilization. But more to the immediate point. The two men caught up in their dispute of ownership reminds me of all those literature classes where the paraphernalia of literary terms dominates, from heroic couplets to metaphysical conceits, while the significance of the poem for the student withers away. For instance, I can imagine asking any two students caught up in their dandled work sheets if they are making some intellectual and emotional connection to a given poem and being met with a blank stare, "That's not what we're supposed to do."

In short I am suggesting that we begin getting our priorities straight, that we face up to the reality that literature as a human phenomenon, a human process, must assuredly continue to exist even if all our classrooms and lectures, all our industry of explication, disappeared tomorrow.

When we get back to first principles, we see that there is little need to waste our time disputing how to judge or evaluate literary works objectively or "correctly." Instead we are better off focusing on the nature of the configuration writers and readers make when they are sharing in the construction and recreation of some text.

Response

Now this broad definition of literature, and the pedagogical stance it implies to, naturally incorporates the student's point of view. In doing so it removes from the realm of chance the student's relationship to a text, infusing in this relationship once again the matter of choice. From selection to response a kind of self-determination is granted favour. The difference between these two perspectives, chance vs. choice, will end up telling us a lot about the kind of responsibility that exists in the world both for us and our students. Chance comes from a latin root [cadere] which means "to fall" or eventually "to die." Interestingly, the words "accident," "cadaver," "decease," "decisions," "cease," and "receding" all derive from a similar root. Of course, it strains credibility to suggest that we can entirely benchmark a word's semantic repetition by merely noting the lexical company it keeps. However, we must be clear that despite the spice it brings to life, the word "chance" should never be confused with life itself.

The world choice, in contrast, goes back to the latin word gustare, meaning "to taste," and appropriately it shares a root derivation with "gusto." While the more chance has been known to paralyze the best of us at times, the active involvment it signifies in life's affairs, indeed invokes a sense of gusto, not the passive receptivity that chance connotes. Such a distinction bears heavily on our definition of literature. In one important sense when we refer to the process of literary engagement we are pointing to the growth and maturing of the emotions. In other words, writers and readers, speakers and listeners, share responsibility for the kind of human response to experience that a text suggests and evokes, and this responsibility should involve an ongoing concern for how sensibility is either fostered or denied.

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Along these lines, in his study of Christopher Caudwell's aesthetics, David Margolies writes,

"Art...is an emotional guide to action...by widening the emotional content of the individual's consciousness, so that he can know more fully what he wants and why he wants it. Art "changes the emotional content of his consciousness so that he can react more subtly and deeply to the world." It is education—directly functional—in the emotional sphere...Art makes man conscious of "the necessity of his instincts" and thereby increases his freedom."

The Function of Literature, p. 63)

The point of Margolies' commentary, is that it is the telling of the tale that turns the chance of the "event" into the choice of the "experience." Until the story is made up, or the work of art is created, we literally have an undifferentiated black hole. So we make an approximation to what happened, so what seems to capture our emotional response, in order that we gain more purposeful control over succeeding events.

Tohono elaborates on this idea:

"Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them...To take the simplest example: a boy, having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf, relates the encounter, describes himself, his conditions before the encounter, the surroundings, the wood, his own light-headedness, and then the wolf's appearance, its movements, the distance between himself and the wolf, etc. All this, if only the boy, when telling the story, again experiences the feelings he has lived through and infests the listeners and compels them to feel what the narrator has experienced, is art."

(What is Art? pp 386-387)

This rich and active process which Tohono describes, can, of course, be subverted in many ways. One of our primary duties as English Teachers, therefore, is...
meaning. With this approach teacher and student collaboratively build critical sensibilities, the natural way, from the inside out, not from the outside in.

In his wise discussion of the teaching of English, *English for the English*, written more than 65 years ago, George Sampson saw the folly of imposing exclusively the “high art” view on the reading selections of children.

There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the reading of boys—... their wild and woolly cowboys and their super-Sherlockians sleuth-hounds, their dashing schoolboy heroes and their utterly villainous cads. In the main these slandered “dreadfuls” are entirely wholesome and almost fiercely moral. That fact that the magistrate periodically denounces them from the bench need not surprise us, for the utterances of magistrates upon all matters connected with education are usually replete with contumelauxcia. A year’s reading of the boy is probably much healthier than a year’s reading to the magistrate.

And he continues in this vein:

The teacher who has just indignantly confiscated a surrepticiously-read “Nelson Lee,” has probably sent it to Mudie’s his weekly requisition for a volume of sentimental lies, romantic sophistications or sordid sex—everything of which he takes for truth about life. The boys who devour the weekly “bloods” are the hopeful boys; the hopeless ones are those who are not interested even in Sexton Blake. (119-20)

What Sampson goes on to advocate is the building up of a primary bond of trust between teacher and student with respect to text selection and response. When the sacred four approach to reading is reversed, a reading base is fostered from which, later, critical distinctions are possible, once the implications for choice are examined and thoroughly rehearsed.

Unfortunately, the contrasting “chance” approach will not be seen as chance at all by teachers who practice it; rather, it will be seen as the result of a careful and deliberate “choice” on their part. But what part has the student as learner played in all this? Nothing, and consequently, such a literature curriculum becomes one of transmission (read chance), all choice (and gusto) long having been forfeited.

Not that all this canon work on the part of the English profession is done with malice. Intentions are of the highest. But the fact placed, the hypothesis tested, is someone else’s and the student’s critical development in turn gets left to chance. But perhaps worst of all, an elitist stance toward the students and their culture begins to dominate and eventually becomes institutionalized in the academy. In its extreme we have professorial voices railing and railing like the following:

It must have been very much easier to read Great Expectations adequately—that is, with a sympathetic and intelligent comprehension of the spirit in which it was written and of what

_Games of Chance, Games of Choice_ it was actually about—in Dickens’s own day, or in any time up to the present, than it evidently is now. For not only has Dickens’s society gone for ever, and with it many (though not all) of the difficulties and problems of a young man living in that age, but the young reader in ours is further handicapped by cross-misdirections from contemporary Dickens specialists.

... anyone who is now engaged in reading English Literature with undergraduates even in England must feel (unless of the same generation) that he has to introduce delicately complex perceptions and a social civilization of which that literature is the flower, to a brutally callous generation as to sensibility, students who except and need not surprise us, for the utterances of magistrates upon all matters connected with education are usually replete with contumelauxcia. A year’s reading of the boy is probably much healthier than a year’s reading to the magistrate.

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what that particular sense might be. Before the telling of the tale the occasion existed as mere chance, but afterward if the story be told this chance is allowed to become reincarnated as choice. Once the story is out in a public arena waiting some agency in its happening, and its ongoing presence helps define me as a person. Such is the birth of self control amid an arena of competing loyalties. And once the poem is out there working its will, the threat that poses to the teacher’s role is now obvious. For the poem encourages the proliferation of options, which in turn places severe strains upon any traditional sense of order. At this point it will not be easy for me the teacher to smash down the lid of the Pandora’s box. I have no naively allowed to fly open.

But the lives are there, whether we keep the lid on or not. In Tracy Kidder’s remarkable book, called simply House, we are allowed to eavesdrop on the lives of a group of people during the process of constructing a single family home in Amherst, Massachusetts. What is so fascinating in the presentations and resolutions, but the string of personal histories that have shaped who these participants are as people—histories that lie behind and thus help to determine the transactions among client, architect, and builder that constitute the drama of the building of this house.

Ned, one of the builders, speaks of how he got into the same trade as his father even though his father had never encouraged him to learn carpentry. It’s funny. I never was going to do that. I looked at Dad, at how he screwed out he was all of the time and what a hateful son of a gun. And yet I found myself lashed with schools and I fell back on the things that I knew and that was one of them.

Woodworking is a very, very fascinating thing for me. I enjoy it a lot. It’s woodworking that fascinates me more than constructing or building. Being with the trees and understanding how the wood accommodates a nail or a screw, that’s what’s sort of magical.

The tension here, between accepting and rejecting his father’s means of livelihood, is especially severe because it parallels Ned’s ambiguous feelings about how he now interprets his father’s treatment of him while he was growing up. And all this is further complicated by the fact that just as Ned seems now to have a real life, this tension carries over directly into how Ned conducts himself on the current job. Like his partners, he remains torn between craftsmanship with its inner harmony and the rough edges and compromises necessary to meet the deadline specified in the contract while still squeezing out some small profit from the work.

Such ambiguities, complications, turn from chance, however, into necessary fact, as the players in this drama rehearse their stories for Mr. Kidder, and they have been choosing all along. And so it is with all of us, allowed when we sit to retain contact with our own sets of tales that have brought us to
the present moment. Literature in this way works its complexities on our lives and the values that they embody.

Values are never static, though as teachers we might wish them to be. At first values appear as innocent directives driving a culture’s ideology from one generation to the next. Yet by their very nature values point to opposition in the culture’s moral life, especially the central opposition of freedom and responsibility. In defining social meanings, values inevitably reveal the competing conditions which gave rise to their existence and thus the individual might be forced to choose anew which side to offer allegiance, from a particular friend to an entire social institution. Unsettling. Better now to ask the answer whether it be about atoms or abortions.

Reader and Text

But, of course, not all literature will back off and allow us to settle comfortably in. For just as it appears to be reinforcing a set of social norms, establishing a “right” pattern of conduct, it takes a swift turn, leaves us standing naked, in need of reassessment. In this way literature works as conscience as we test our hypotheses against those of the narrator. Raymond Williams elaborates on this process of how a culture’s ideology is both maintained and disrupted:

...the area to which most students of literature normally refer their reading and their judgment, that area summarised in the decisive term “experience”, is in fact to be seen within the sphere of ideology. Indeed, experience is seen as the most common form of ideology. It is where the deep structures of the society actually reproduce themselves as conscious life... [Literature] is inseparably ideological, but its specific relative autonomy is that it is a form of writing, a form of practice, in which ideology both exists and is or can be arbitrarily dis-joined and questioned. Thus the value of literature is precisely that it is one of the areas where the grip of ideology is or can be loosened, because although it cannot escape ideological construction, the point about its literatures is that it is a continual questioning of it internally. So you get readings which are very similar to certain recent semiological readings, where you construct a text and subtext, where you can say “this is what is reproduced from the ideology” but also, “this is what is incongruously happening in the text which undermines or questions or is in certain cases entirely subverts it”.

(Writing in Society, pp. 207-8)

Telling our own or listening to another’s a poetic fiction provides us with a ticket into the unknown. We want to disrupt; we want to conserve. Is merely throwing the dice we allow ourselves to forget where responsibility lies. Sometimes it would be easier if all life could be left to chance. Whatever came long would determine our roles and obligations. With nothing to earn, there would be no compensating losses. We become gamblers when we fail to adequately prepare our maps of human motivation.

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