

Robert Nathan, “Why It Matters: The Value of Literature as Object of Inquiry in Qualitative Research.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 82. 1 (2013) 72-86.

According to Robert Nathan’s provocative characterisation, qualitative social science research is in urgent need of a personality inventory: the hybrid offspring of strict empirical observation and creative narrative art, practices such as phenomenology and ethnography seem so directed towards pleasing Father Science that they tend to disavow their essential inheritance from Mother Literature altogether. In “Why It Matters: The Value of Literature as Object of Inquiry into Qualitative Research,” Nathan states an intriguing case for reconciliation, arguing that the unique tools and experience of literary scholars might profitably be harnessed in service of social research, if only the researchers themselves might allow it.

Nathan’s first proposition in support of his overall argument will be familiar to many: qualitative social science texts are fundamentally similar to literary texts, he states, in the sense that they each selectively impose a subjective representational narrative upon the non-narrative, objective infinity of reality. The exclusion of novels from one’s research on the grounds that they distort reality is therefore merely ideological. Citing Hayden White, Nelson Phillips, and John Ziman, Nathan recounts the well-known ‘linguistic relativity hypothesis’, according to which language does not simply represent the categories of reality, but in fact creates them. Consequently, he continues, accepted qualitative practices cannot be distinguished from their literary equivalents, since neither can claim to represent external reality with transparent objectivity.

Rather than use this “discredited objectivity” (77) as a stick with which to beat both literature and qualitative research alike, Nathan spies an opportunity to allow literature into the social sciences fold. While traditional social sciences texts are bound by a false conception of their one-to-one correspondence with a singular ‘real world’, he notes, literature’s freedom to extend beyond the limitations of the realist form enables it to engage with the complexities of reality in a more complex, multivalent manner. In this regard, literature – and particularly the novel – constitutes a uniquely valuable source of insight to social scientists, and ought not therefore to be dismissed so readily as has typically been the case.

Having established some justification for the novel’s potentially singular contribution to social science, Nathan goes on to identify two practical ways in which it might be used: first, as a primary *object* of social inquiry, analogous to any other cultural artefact; second, as a *form* of social inquiry, analogous to an ethnography. In both instances, his test case for the ideal source text is ‘immigrant fiction’: by enabling the migrant to synthesise his or her own experience of migration into a textual form of his or her own choosing, he suggests, the novel might provide a truer account of that experience than, for instance, that same migrant’s responses to an interviewer’s questions.

Recognising some likely concerns with this proposal – deliberate fictionalisation adds another filter between reality and observation; the implication that only ‘insiders’ can speak for a given culture – Nathan asks whether the acceptance of novels as primary objects would require social scientists to engage not only with the texts themselves, but also with literary studies and criticism. Noting that the crudely materialist understanding of novels as static artefacts with singular

‘correct’ readings is clearly to be discouraged, he nevertheless suggests that the ‘mirror’ that literature holds up to the world does indeed reflect some of its ‘contours’.

The challenge of interpreting these reflections, he concludes, requires the skills and experience of the literary scholar, and hence indicates the necessity for interdisciplinary collaboration. Following a brief summary of the dangers of mining fiction for fixed, substantive, quotable evidence, it is upon this general plea for open-mindedness that Nathan settles, urging that “this will be of benefit not only to our understanding of society but also to our comprehension of how that understanding is derived” (85).

While on the whole there is little to dispute in Nathan’s eminently worthwhile initiatory discussion – not least because its conclusions are so open-ended – one cannot help but envision quite severe perturbations in the delicate interdisciplinary ecosystem he hopes to cultivate. The benefits to social science research of a sophisticated, sensitive approach to using novels in qualitative studies seem clear enough; it is less clear, however, how far one might be able to legitimately justify the selection of texts deemed ‘appropriate’ for use within in a given social study, at the expense of other less amenable works. What degree of openness to literary experimentation might a study with pretensions to influencing social policy tolerate, for instance, and how might this degree alter the representativeness of the study? If one were seeking funding for social research, moreover, then how might one’s designation of a particular novel as ‘valuable’ be questionably influenced? Ultimately, and quite contrarily to his admirable intentions, the logical conclusion of Nathan’s proposal might well be the establishment of a canon of worthy, reductive realist novels, steadily calcifying in the reading lists of various social sciences courses, while genuine literary experimentation – and hence the sort of insight Nathan seeks to ‘exploit’ – finds itself retreating to the departmental ghetto from whence it came. Whatever else, though, this kind of receptive, constructive thinking is undoubtedly welcome within the field of literature and science, and one can only hope that Nathan’s article helps bring to an end an identity crisis in the qualitative social sciences that has surely gone on too long.

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