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Critical Synopsis #3

Synopsis: Denotatively, Literally, Technically

What does it mean to read denotatively, technically or literally? In order to answer this question, Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt first address a question we have been confronting all semester: what do we do with extraneous, "unnecessary" information in the novel, a specialised glossary of sorts? Some details, they suggest, are necessary for our comprehension, or else we remain "on the outside," (2) of the world the writer creates, taken over by the fictional quality of the novel. Reading denotatively, technically or literally means acknowledging the sites of these details as sites of meaning. Even if we cannot interpret these details – as we often will not be able to do – we can gesture to the fact that we are leaving language unread, recognising that they need to be understood in more than simply a definitional sense. They suggest that language that cannot be read or understood in itself and requires a denotative reading produces something akin to the reality effect, a "naturalist effect" that signals that what we are reading is authentic and accurate, a faithful depiction of a way of life that we are otherwise unfamiliar with. Inquiring into the details used to provide this effect, while placing a huge burden on the reader, might help us connect with the writer's construction of the world.

Freedgood and Schmitt effectively challenge the idea that a literal or denotative reading involves simply the surface of the text or looking up definitions – in many ways, a denotative reading is not actually denotative. Nonfigurative reading is actually difficult and involves a great deal of "research imagination," because it involves thinking about various elements of the text in dialogue with each other and conceptualising the function these details have in the plot.

Rather than revealing meaning however, denotative, literal and technical language can often work to restore obscurity to the novel. This is partly because this sort of language teaches us that certain parts of the text must be left alone, that we have to look "through and around" this language rather than at it – after all, we cannot devote all our attention to reference. As such, language is transformed into a "thing," with its flow in the circuits of consumption, production and distribution temporarily arrested. Furthermore, the gap between words and things – the fundamental problem of representation – only enhances this obscurity. Even Barthes hints at the difficulty of seemingly simple, literal language in *The Preparation of the Novel,* where he posits a journey to the literal using the Zen parable about stages on the path to enlightenment. While we start off with a literal reading (the mountains are mountains), we have to interpret this literal reading (the mountains aren't mountains anymore) to finally arrive back at the third state, or literal II, where "the mountains are mountains again" (5). What this essentially means is that a literalist reading is not devoid of interpretation – rather, interpretation is essential because the mind must deconstruct the vague concepts and outlines of literal I to arrive at the precise image of literal 2 (the way light hits the mountain, how they look in context with the rest of the reading), a task that requires a lot of mental work.

What is the value of reading denotatively? For one, it allows us to acknowledge the opacity of language, recognising that we often need supplemental information like dictionaries, maps or surveys for each denotation. This reading also allows us to recognise the

novel as a work of labor by the novelist, who has undergone large amounts of research, and by characters that ultimately representations "the social relations of a kind of production" (8) that that novel is trying to create and teach us, that we otherwise miss out on. Denotative reading allows us to think complexly about reference, such that we conceptualise the role between novels, manuals and experiment to be "jagged, uneven, contradictory, frustrating and part of a larger work of reference," allowing us to think not only of how meaning is made, but how reference itself is made.

Freedgood and Schmitt concede that a literal reading is difficult to do. Even while we read, we only retain the conceptual gist of a text rather than actual words; the reader than has to do a lot of work to translate this "gist" into a coherent world that they think about. Representations and details thus function as cues to remind us of this world, as the "flotsam and jetsam" of the mind's knowledge stores. Yet, reading literally is meant to prevent us precisely from this kind of reflexive reading, the quick movement from words to concepts. By stumbling over each detail in a slow and ungainly way, reading denotatively highlights some of the buried archives within texts that can be read alongside it. Even if we cannot look everything up while reading – which is often a practical truth – we should concede that this inability leaves us in some way, alienated from the text.

To what extent, then, have we been deprived of the "naturalist effect," in our lack of attention to the details in some of these novels? I, for one, did not look up all the information presented to be in *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, or in *Hard Cash.* Perhaps this does leave us impoverished in leaving buried the various archives Flaubert and Reade might have used. I think however, in examining their notes, we conducted at least one kind of denotative study that might have revealed the labor of the novelist as well as the instability of technical language, with these writers pushing the scientific into literality and then moving it back again and again – thus complicating a simple idea of reference.