

Pope Francis as Literary Theorist: Reader Response, Poststructuralism, and Postcoloniality in “Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation”

Cynthia A. Leenerts
East Stroudsburg University

On 17 July 2024, Pope Francis published “Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation,”¹ initially intended to focus solely on clergy formation, but which he expanded to argue for “the value of reading novels and poems as part of one’s path to personal maturity.”² Drawing on his background as a literature teacher at a Jesuit school in 1964-65, Francis addresses, in 44 flash-meditation paragraphs, faith and culture; listening to another person’s voice; discernment; seeing through the eyes of others; the spiritual power of literature, and more. Along with colleagues in the South Asian Literary Association (published in this forum), I’ve discovered ways in which this Letter can influence approaches and curriculum, especially concerning our field of postcolonial/decolonial literatures.³ Not only can it enrich our approach to literature: considering the inclusivity written into it, it can harmonize with a variety of theoretical outlooks, as well as in a more fundamental way, call out the prevalent “corporate university” devaluation of literary studies.

Having expanded his focus beyond clergy to all Christians, Pope Francis addresses “the value of reading novels and poems as part of one’s path to personal maturity”—to which I would add that the audience can expand to humanitarians at large—and I would include literary essays, short stories, film, and more as genres. Considering how Francis tends to welcome all who profess any faith or cosmology, I doubt he would disagree, but he needed to keep his Letter focused and streamlined. Still, since he has already nudged open the door by directing the Letter to a more general audience, a great deal else can walk in, to good effect, to anyone who teaches literature, no matter what spiritual outlook.

Initially focusing on his original intended audience, Francis advises reading as an adjunct to or even as an alternative to prayer, holding that “a good book can help us weather the storm until we find peace of mind” and to circumvent obsessive thoughts.⁴ This easily applies to anyone, as the process of reading, even as mere escape, can circumvent any troubling preoccupations. But Francis takes it further, even on a secular level: what do

readers actually *do* when immersed in a text? Without specifically addressing reader-response theory,⁵ he embodies it:

Readers in some sense rewrite a text, enlarging its scope through their imagination, creating a whole world by bringing into play their skills, their memory, their dreams and their personal history, with all its drama and symbolism. In this way, what emerges is a text quite different from the one the author intended to write. A literary work is thus a living and ever-fruitful text.⁶

Conversely, in a poststructuralist move,⁷ he later notes:

Reading, as an act of “discernment,” directly involves the reader as both the “subject” who reads and as the “object” of what is being read. In reading a novel or a work of poetry, the reader actually experiences “being read” by the words that he or she is reading. Readers can thus be compared to players on a field: they play the game, but the game is also played through them, in the sense that they are totally caught up in the action.⁸

Francis argues that “Literature [...] has to do, in one way or another, with our deepest desires in this life, for on a profound level literature engages our concrete existence, with its innate tensions, desires and meaningful experiences.⁹ Any preoccupations can be drawn into this process and transformed. He writes that he discovered this with his students,¹⁰ who were initially not keen on reading the canonical *El Cid*, and instead wanted to read Garcia Lorca—so he decided they could read *El Cid* at home, but in class would discuss works/authors of their choice, taking instead of an either/or approach, a both/and one that ultimately led students to branch back to canonical works, in addition to reading the contemporary texts they desired. Finding it counterproductive to make students read out of a sense of duty, Francis let contemporary literature spark their enthusiasm, then successfully bridged contemporary and canonical in a way that makes me wish I’d been one of his students, so I could have seen him in action.

While most of the literature that Francis discusses has its roots in Europe, once that door has been pushed open, the world can enter. He rhetorically asks:

How can we reach the core of cultures ancient and new if we are unfamiliar with, disregard or dismiss their symbols, messages, artistic expressions, and the stories with which they have captured and

evoked their loftiest ideals and aspirations, as well as their deepest sufferings, fears and passions? How can we speak to the hearts of men and women if we ignore, set aside or fail to appreciate the “stories” by which they sought to express and lay bare the drama of their lived experience in novels and poems?¹¹

He comments on the practical benefits of reading, which cut across many divides: building vocabulary and self-expression; stimulating imagination and creativity; improving concentration, and “[calming] stress and anxiety.”¹² Getting involved with fictional characters helps readers solve analogous problems and deal with similar situations in their own lives.¹³ I can attest to that last one: when I was working through a difficult situation, one of my colleagues asked, “If you were reading about this in a novel, what would you hope the character would do?” I instantly knew—and have gone on to ask others in similar jams. Francis draws on Proust’s observation that “Novels unleash ‘in us, in the space of an hour, all the possible joys and misfortunes that, in life, it would take us entire years to know even slightly,’” as well as on C.S. Lewis’ realization that “In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do,”¹⁴ connecting the self-transcension of reading with other activities, putting reading on a par with worship, love, moral action, and knowing. Proust and Lewis provide an effective bridge to Francis’ transition from the personal realm to the social and the spiritual: he notes that it is not his intention “to focus solely on the personal advantages to be drawn from reading, but to reflect on the most important reasons for encouraging a renewed love for reading,”¹⁵ which involve connecting with others and (because his project is to write about the spiritual formation of clergy and of Christians in general) with the world and with God. One can take this project as far as desired in one’s personal life, and as far as is appropriate in our secular teaching venue: the world, our home, is a large and varied enough place.

Francis also draws on Jorge Luis Borges (himself once a teacher), who told his own students that “the most important thing is simply to read” in an immersive way, “rather than to fixate on ideas and critical comments.”¹⁶ Borges realized that students may not initially understand much of what they read, but that they are, in Borges’ words, hearing “another person’s voice”: a definition of literature that resonates with Francis, as such intense listening keeps humanity connected¹⁷ and which promotes sensitivity “to the mystery of other persons.”¹⁸

In my venue, students frequently do not come to my classes widely read, neither globally nor temporally. Like Francis' students, they have their reading preferences, their niches (as did I as an undergrad), but regardless, they tend to come in with open minds. Even if they aren't avid readers, they know that they're in for it. The world is wide and time is deep. Barriers of space and time must be crossed, our readings throwing bridges across the gaps. In our studies (postcolonial, graphic novel, British literature, world literature, literature about migration, and more), aware of the familiar, we encounter the Other.

Ultimately, Francis writes, "In terms of the use of language, reading a literary text places us in the position of seeing through the eyes of others," emphasizing that "Without such empathy, there can be no solidarity, sharing, compassion, mercy. In reading we discover that our feelings are not simply our own, they are universal, and so even the most destitute person does not feel alone."¹⁹ Aligning himself with the second century BCE Roman playwright (and former enslaved man) Terence, he argues, "nothing that is human is indifferent to us."²⁰

And so, with our students, we can and must transcend boundaries of culture: of ethnicity, of region, of temporality.

I am grateful that Pope Francis ultimately addresses all Christians (and arguably all those of good will), because this move makes it possible to take much of his Letter even further into the secular world. In my initial reading, I was surprised at the way he indirectly touches on literary criticism—on reader response, on poststructuralism—and at how, without spelling it out, he makes his Letter relevant to one who teaches postcolonial and other literatures beyond the ones in his ready repertoire. I was also surprised to learn that Pope Francis had long ago gone ecocritical, in *Laudato si'* (*On Care for Our Common Home*) (2015)²¹ and *Laudate Deum* (*To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis*) (2023).²² In *Laudato si'*, he gently invites his readers to wake up to the climate crisis. Eight years later, in *Laudate Deum*, because as a planet, we haven't really listened very well—his call ramps up to urgent.

This goes beyond mere racking up of points for the pontiff on the theoretical approaches he has addressed. As a postcolonialist—never mind as an inhabitant of the planet—I cannot help but be ecocritical, as one can connect postcolonial theory with ecocriticism: relationships between animal/plant "kingdoms" and hegemonic humankind, replete with exploitation and oppression, are analogous to the strife and suffering that colonizers inflict upon the colonized. We are back to—forward to?—liberation theology,

opened up for all life forms. Concerning the literatures that I teach, I hold, along with Francis:

In reading about violence, narrowness or frailty on the part of others, we have an opportunity to reflect on our own experiences of these realities. By opening up to the reader a broader view of the grandeur and misery of human experience, literature teaches us patience in trying to [understand] others, humility in approaching complex situations, meekness in our judgement of individuals and sensitivity to our human condition. Judgement is certainly needed, but we must never forget its limited scope. Judgement must never issue in a death sentence, eliminating persons or suppressing our humanity for the sake of a soulless absolutizing of the law.²³

In this last argument, I feel encouraged, called in, concerning the necessity to exercise, in the human struggles laid out in literature, judgement tempered with compassion: to carefully listen, to appreciate nuance, to critically examine my own critical thinking, so that I can encourage my students to do the same, so that literature, ever-changing, can similarly transform them as they engage with it, so that they in turn can encourage the ones who come after them.

¹ Francis, “Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation,” *Holy See*, 17 Jul. 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>. All cited numbers of Pope Francis’ “Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation” refer to his paragraph numbers, as the (online) document is not paginated. All references are to this Letter, unless otherwise specified.

² Francis, 1.

³ In *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Francis Dale Parker describes *postcolonial* theory as having “emerged as a convenient label for the study of colonialism, postcolonialism, and more broadly, cultural and political relations between more powerful and less powerful nations and peoples” (298–99). As I understand it, the term *decolonial* counters the emphasis on (mostly European and American) domination of those “less powerful nations and peoples”: it’s not merely *post-* (after); the *de-* suggests a process that goes beyond surviving or moving beyond colonialism: more like undoing it.

⁴ Francis, 2.

⁵ Reader-response criticism and theory emerged in the late 1960s/early 1970s as a way to foreground the readers, each of whom brings something to the table, in making meaning in a text. Authorial intention, focused on before the advent of reader-

response, is now simply one strand in a cable. Now this approach is so widespread and universal that, as Parker notes, “We might go so far as to say that there is no separate category of ‘reader-response criticism,’ because all criticism is reader-response criticism” (*How to Interpret Literature*, 354). Pope Francis’ assertion that “readers in some sense rewrite a text, enlarging its scope through their imagination” is one of the most clear examples of reader-response that I’ve encountered.

⁶ Francis, 3.

⁷ For the purposes of this essay, the term *poststructuralism* refers to “criticism that draws on deconstruction” (Parker, *How to Interpret Literature*, 88). Deconstruction tends to counterintuitively multiply meaning in a text, sometimes flipping traditional understandings upside down and holding them in creative tension, as in Pope Francis’ notion of literature’s “game” playing the “players” at the same time that the players are playing the game.

⁸ Francis, 29.

⁹ Francis, 6.

¹⁰ Francis, 7.

¹¹ Francis, 9.

¹² Francis, 16.

¹³ Francis, 17.

¹⁴ Francis, 18.

¹⁵ Francis, 19.

¹⁶ Francis, 20.

¹⁷ Francis, 20.

¹⁸ Francis, 21.

¹⁹ Francis, 34.

²⁰ Francis, 37.

²¹ Francis, *Laudato si’ (On Care for Our Common Home)*. Holy See, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

²² Francis, *Laudate Deum (To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis)*. Holy See, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html.

²³ Francis, 39.