Reader-Response Theory and Criticism

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Reader-response criticism maintains that the interpretive activities of readers, rather than the author’s intention or the text’s structure, explain a text’s significance and aesthetic value. Biographical accounts of how a writer responds to his or her critics initiated this kind of criticism. That is, since a writer may respond to commentary provided by friends, reviewers, or critics, biographers assumed that the study of these responses helps to explain how and why the style, ideas, aims, or forms of the writer evolved (see, e.g., McGann 24). Modern versions of this criticism emerged in the 1970s, in reaction against the hegemonic NEW CRITICISM, which reduced accounts of the reader’s responses to the infamous “affective fallacy” and treated the devices and structures of the text as purely objective. The modern versions include psychological and theoretical accounts of the reader’s activity and sociohistorical accounts of a text’s interpretations or an author’s reception. The psychological and theoretical accounts preserve the scientific objectivity of the critic or the transformative force of textual or aesthetic norms, whereas the historical accounts of literary reception limit or repudiate aesthetic norms and examine the reader’s social or institutional context, what STANLEY FISH terms his or her "interpretive community."

For example, Norman Holland, who, trained in psychoanalysis, held a position at the Center for Psychological Study of the Arts, State University of New York at Buffalo, engages in a psychological criticism that considers interpretation a function of a reader’s identity. Holland claims that while readers’ responses to William Faulkner’s "A Rose for Emily," for example, may show remarkable differences, the critic does not evaluate the responses; the critic discerns each reader’s characteristic traits, including defensiveness, indifference, aggressiveness, or vulnerability (Holland 123–24). Moreover, Holland says that once the facts of a text have satisfied the ego defenses of the reader, the reader readily projects his or her fears and wishes onto it. In this process, which Holland labels "DEFT" (defense, expectation, fantasy, transformation), the text frees the reader to reexperience his or her self-defining fantasies and to grasp their significance (Holland and Sherman 217).

Just as the reader interprets the text in ways that reveal his identity, so the critic interprets the reader’s interpretation in ways revealing the critic’s indifferent identity. As Holland says, "Indeed, the only way one can ever discover unity in texts or identity in selves is by creating them from one’s own inner style" (Holland 130). Readers lose autonomy, for the psychoanalytic analyses of the critic reveal the unconscious defenses and fantasies projected by the readers, not their self-determination or their self-improvement. As a consequence, even though the critic’s interpretation reveals the his or her identity, the interpretive power of the critic depends on his or her scientific objectivity.

Since the late 1960s, Wolfgang Iser, who, along with his colleague Hans Robert Jauss, formed Germany’s influential Constance school and who holds a position at the University of California at Irvine, also maintains that the reader’s activity explains textual interpretation; however, he considers scientific objectivity a "classical," "absolute" norm concealing "hidden meanings" and stifling the reader’s imagination. In The Implied Reader (1972) and The Act of Reading (1976) Iser construes the text as a multilayered structure through which readers wander, constructing projections ("pretentions") of new experience and reinterpretations ("retentions") of past experience. Influenced by the phenomenological critic Roman Ingarden, who describes the "essence" of the literary text as a polyphonic structure concretized but not fully realized by the reader’s activity, Iser believes that a "potential" of the text admits other readings, which represent other potentials. Iser still assumes that the text establishes norms guiding and limiting readers: "The process of assembling the meaning of the text . . . does not lead to daydreaming but to the fulfillment of conditions that have already been structured in the text" (Act 49–50); however, the text’s potentials, which include indeterminate gaps, blanks, discrepancies, and absences, disturb the structure and stimulate the reader’s activity (98–99). Readers synthesize "perspectives" deriving from the text’s narrator, characters, plot, and explicit reader, but the text still signals, guides, directs, and manipulates them, moving them to reinterpret the text and, more importantly, to produce what it cannot: the experience of a coherent, living whole growing out of "the alteration or falsification of that which is already ours" (98–99, 132).

In other words, the text’s indeterminate structures acquire a negative force, prodding readers to construct their own text and change their lives. Iser maintains that although schools, parents, and churches may have taught readers to read, their "controlled observation" of themselves allows them to escape this "fallen" world and improve their lives. In a paradoxical way, the indeterminate negativity of the literary text can move the reader not only to produce a coherent text but also to adopt positive values and redemptive beliefs.
In *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (1993) Iser acknowledges that literature has lost the capacity to guide or improve the reader because the horrors of two world wars and the competition from music, film, and other media have rendered literature marginal. To restore its "all-encompassing" function, he adopts a general aesthetic theory in which fiction and the imaginary play various roles in everyday life at the same time that they resist such limiting roles and remain indefinable. He argues that philosophy has recently accorded both fiction and the imaginary a positive role in understanding and even constituting reality; at the same time, the activity of play, whereby fiction and the imaginary determine each other, enables fiction and the imaginary to escape cognitive discourses and break the boundaries between thought and reality. Iser claims that while all discourses foster this play between the fictive and the imaginary, literature provides the paradigmatic case. He still dismisses the influence of schools and other everyday cultural institutions, but what he terms literature’s "negativity," which undermines established beliefs and fixed practices, and literature’s "doubling," which overcomes the opposition of fiction and reality or self and other, enable literature to reveal the plasticity or new human possibilities described by a literary anthropology. Similarly, in *The Range of Interpretation* (2000) Iser argues that, like the interplay of the fictive and the imaginary, literary forms of cultural translation or interpretation explain the practices of psychological, sociological, and theological systems and, by envisaging new possibilities, expose their limits and transcend them.

Like Holland and Iser, Stanley Fish, a scholar of Milton’s poetry and prose and a theorist of law and literature, claims that the irreducible effects of language move readers to produce interpretations, and that, as a normative force, the author teaches or fashions the reader. For instance, in his early "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics " (1970), Fish says that reading is a temporal process in which the reader constructs interpretations and repudiates them in favor of new ones. Fish argues, however, that even though what readers read first may contradict what they subsequently read, that contradiction does not invalidate their first or their subsequent readings. If they are competent, such inconsistency only shows that they are experiencing a certain kind of text, not that they are misconstruing its true structure or its author’s intention.

In later work, Fish also abandons the assumption that competent readers discover one "deep structure" or normative intention because that assumption did not enable him to explain why some readers interpret a text in one way and others interpret it another. He also rejects the belief that aesthetic theory ensures a reader’s self-consciousness, governs interpretive practice, or changes anything at all. He admits that theorists may examine the rhetorical figures of a text, the unifying intention of its author, its play of gender differences, or its critiques of ideology; however, he considers these diverse interpretive practices a matter of local, Derridean, authorial, feminist, or Marxist beliefs, not of valid theory, since general rules or universal norms cannot determine correct interpretations ("Consequences" 433–38; see also Knapp and Michaels 738–40).

Adopting the pragmatist’s belief that the community of inquirers establishes the truth of a theory, Fish claims, moreover, that what determines an interpretation’s validity is not the identity of the reader or the norms of aesthetic theory but the ideals and methods of the reader’s "interpretive community," the group of scholars who accept and apply a common strategy and evaluate performances of it (*Is There* 171). New Critics, authorial humanists, phenomenologists, structuralists, Derrideans, feminists, and Marxists break into diverse communities whose discourse institutions disseminate, students master, scholars judge, and journals and publishing houses distribute. To reject the absolute ground of an author’s intention or a text’s structure is not to consider any interpretation as good as any other or to lapse into a vacuous relativism, as critics say; rather, since the community of similar interpreters judges an interpretation, some interpretations are better or worse than others, at least for that community. For example, professional critics of Milton will agree, Fish says, that Milton’s poetry cannot be seen as "conflicted or tragic or inconclusive or polysemous or paradoxical," as modern critics say, because Milton believes that "God is God and not one of a number of contending forces" (*How Milton* 14).

Like Holland and Iser, Steven Mailloux, a scholar of American literature, pragmatist philosophy, and literary theory and the former chair of Syracuse University’s controversial English department, maintains that authors communicate meanings to readers and in this way teach readers how to read. Like Fish, he claims that different readers produce different interpretations and even different texts because diverse rhetorical conventions govern their interpretive practices. For example, in *Reception Histories* he construes interpretation as an act of translation whereby a formal reader may try to approximate the words of the text, while an authorial reader uses textual, biographical, or historical evidence to clarify the intentions of the author (46). He objects that the empiricist Fish consigns too much to the reader’s beliefs and too little to theory, which, Mailloux says, has at least unexpected consequences: it directs research, precludes unacceptable views, and exposes concealed interests (*Rhetorical* 151–66). He still repudiates theoretical ideals but does not dismiss universal theory in favor of local beliefs, as Fish does; instead, he rejects the metaphysical quest for ultimate grounds, irrefutable arguments, or foundational truths, as Richard Rorty does. As he says, to reject theory is to focus "on the rhetorical dynamics among interpreters within specific cultural settings ... theory soon turns into rhetorical history" (144–45). What is more, while Fish insists that interpretation is professional, Mailloux characterizes interpretation as a "politically interested act" because he adopts the Foucauldian notion that it "participates in ... a politics embedded in institutional
structures and specific cultural practices" (149). More profoundly than Fish’s account of interpretive communities or Iser’s account of the reader’s transformations, Mailloux’s antifoundational "rhetorical hermeneutics" explains the changing history and politics of a text’s many readings.

Also political, a number of critics develop a feminist reader-response criticism and feminist and Marxist histories of reception. For instance, Patrocinio Schweickart, who holds a joint position in English and women’s studies at Purdue University, defends literature’s transformative power but complains that reader-response criticism ignores differences of gender because its main proponents have been highly privileged males and its main texts, male texts ("Reading Ourselves" 35). To overcome this "androcentric" bias, reader-response criticism should, Schweickart says, address women readers and women’s texts in order to communicate with the female presence in them. This criticism should also resist the patriarchal incultation of a masculine perspective, especially what she calls the "immasculation" whereby women come to consider themselves the other. In other words, Schweickart argues that a feminist reader-response critic will read male and female texts differently. In Iser’s fashion the feminist critic recognizes that since the immasculation produced by the male text is a result of her own response, she can resist it. In Fish or Mailloux’s fashion, the feminist critic expects the feminist community to validate her account of a female author if it shows her subjective engagement rather than the text’s structure or the author’s intention.

Janice Radway, a scholar of the history of literacy and reading in the United States, also defends a feminist kind of reader-response criticism, but rather than a theoretical account of engaged feminist reading, she undertakes objective, empirical studies of modern women’s responses. For example, in Reading the Romance she examines how a group of approximately 40 women readers read and interpret the contemporary romance novels recommended by Dorothy Evans, a local bookstore clerk. She shows that these women’s genre conceptions, preferences, and reading habits are "tied to their daily routines, which themselves are a function of education, social role, and class position" (50). Radway effectively demonstrates, moreover, that contrary to formal criticism, which construes popular culture as mere escape or mindless entertainment, romance reading allows these women to escape their everyday activities and explore and reflect on their habits and lives.

Jane Tompkins, a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature and, later, of curriculum and instruction, also defends popular culture, but she undertakes historical studies of literary reception, not empirical accounts of contemporary women’s responses. In "The Reader in History" she argues that reader-response critics mistakenly adopt the New Critical faith in textual interpretation. They construe it as a matter of the reader’s mental processes, not the text’s figures, but retain the formal insistence on interpretation. As she says, "Although New Critics and reader-oriented critics do not locate meaning in the same place, both schools assume that to specify meaning is criticism’s ultimate goal" (201). Like Radway, she fears that this formal emphasis on meaning renders critics unable to appreciate popular literature. Critics who esteem what she terms "psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy" demean popular fiction despite and even because of its great popularity (Sensational xvii).

Moreover, Tompkins complains that this professional emphasis is inimical to literature’s broad sociopolitical interests, which are, she insists, pressing and urgent and not merely theoretical (see "Indians"). Consider, for instance, Sensational Designs, which examines the politics of nineteenth-century American literary reception. She points out that in the 1840s and 1850s critics praised both the popular Susan Warner and the sophisticated Nathaniel Hawthorne for depicting idealized childhood, sentimental domesticity, and Christian virtues (Sensational 17). What distinguished Hawthorne from Warner was not Hawthorne’s complexity or ambiguity but his position in society. Thanks to his family, his education, his publishers, and his politics, he possessed close ties to American cultural elites, whereas Warner had no such ties. As a consequence, he acquired what Warner lost—a position in the American literary canon (32–33). Similarly, in "Indians" Tompkins considers a valid account of the American Indians’ genocidal destruction an urgent, moral issue, yet she fears that the incommensurable ways in which historians discuss the relationships between the Puritans and the Indians and, more generally, between Europeans and Indians undermine our ability to know what really happened, especially if we grant the poststructuralist belief that the observer’s point of view determines his or her accounts of events. Nonetheless, she refuses to lapse into "moral relativism" or to abandon all hope of a legitimate account because the phenomena—conquest, massacre, genocide—demand forceful judgment and compelling analysis and interpretation.

Tony Bennett, a British scholar of Marxist theory and of cultural policy, also justifies the study of popular culture and broad social policies, but initially he defends Althusserian Marxism, which understands criticism as a science escaping the partial truths of a manipulative ideology and literary realism, as the effect of established conventions, not the imitation of an independent reality. As a result, he rejects the traditional Marxist "dualism" whereby an objective history grounds an indeterminate text or culture. He argues that traditional Marxists explained canonical works in profound, sociohistorical terms but, instead of examining a work’s contemporary import, maintained that when history ends and communism begins, the universality of a text’s values will be self-evident (see Outside 31–33, Marxism 140–41, and "Texts" 13).
Bennett still considers literature a historical construct, but he denies that literature possesses a timeless essence that includes only a few established genres and reveals the universal truths of our human nature. He maintains instead that literature’s canonical genres and texts and opposition to nonliterary discourses have changed markedly, especially in the twentieth century, when the media have so heavily influenced the reader’s practices (15). He claims, moreover, that literature does not exclude popular culture; on the contrary, like high art, it employs intertextuality, figural forms, and other literary devices. He and Janet Woollacott argue, for example, that in the 1960s and 1970s, when the James Bond novels and films became popular, they effectively subverted the older spy fiction, in which a prudish but gentlemanly British agent wards off threats to Britain’s national integrity (Bond 83).

Like Fish and Mailloux, Bennett critiques foundational aesthetic or textual norms and examines the reader’s interpretive community or, in his terms, "reading formation." In Bond and Beyond, for example, he and Janet Woollacott show that established "reading formations" situate and construct the reader’s norms and ideals (59–60). To interpret a text is to contest its terrain, to vindicate one’s methods and ideologies, and, by implication if not by explicit assertion, to debunk opposed methods and ideologies. Mailloux also favors a Foucauldian approach, but he emphasizes the broad, sociopolitical import of rhetorical practices, whereas Bennett limits their constitutive force and acknowledges the governmental policies or technologies of power regulating cultural institutions. He shows, for example, that during the nineteenth century, when the schools turned literature into a "moral technology," the ideal teacher and, subsequently, the multilayered text made the reader’s interpretive activity the basis of his or her unending ethical improvement (Outside 177–80). The aesthetic negativity of the text does not transform the reader, as Iser says; rather, a text provides "a space in which to exhibit not correct readings but a way of reading" because literary study’s authoritative mechanisms or "reading formations" impose on the reader indeterminate norms capable of "endless revision."

Bennett forcefully demonstrates that in defense of aesthetic self-consciousness, radical theorists reduce educational institutions to a political instrument or to a threatening cooptation and ignore their positive features, yet in most colleges and universities, which are under strict state regulation, Cultural Studies can, at best, contribute to a student’s general education requirements and employment prospects (Culture 32). In his relatively early "Texts in History" (1984), Bennett claims that reception study disrupts the institutional reproduction of established schools or "reading formations" and situates texts in "different reading formations," which he identifies with working-class, feminist, and African American movements. In later work, like Fish, who divides literature from politics, Bennett maintains that the "institutional placement" of modern intellectuals in "tertiary educational institutions" allows only formal policies, rather than a progressive politics (Culture 32). As he says, work in educational institutions "is in no way to be downgraded or regarded as less vital politically than the attempt to produce new collective forms of cultural association" (Outside 239).

Similarly, in Culture: A Reformer’s Science (1998) Bennett faults the Gramscian notion that, creating political assent or imposing "hegemony," culture emanates from a centering social formation and integrates and mediates diverse levels of social organization (76–77); rather, various technologies produce various cultural resources and impose equally various forms and kinds of discipline or governmental organization (69–70; see also Miller). Such technologies produce cultural resources imposing equally various forms of normality. Museums, libraries, television, movies, or academic disciplines, especially economics, political science, and literary criticism, constitute subjects with diverse economic, political, or literary kinds of loyalty or citizenship.

Schweikart complains that established as common sense, reader-response criticism has not changed much since its origins in the 1980s ("Reading as Communicative Action" 70), yet important methodological differences have emerged. Unlike Radway, Holland, and Iser, she faults the masculinist bias of reader-response criticism; these critics all assume, nonetheless, that while the subjective beliefs, ideals, and paradigms of readers explain their interpretations of a text, critics preserve their objectivity and the text or aesthetic theory, its transcendent norms. By contrast, despite the many differences between Bennett, Fish, Mailloux, and Tompkins, their reception study critiques the foundational norms of aesthetic theory and situates the diverse interpretations of a text’s many readers within their "interpretive communities," "rhetorical practices," or "reading formations," thereby acknowledging how deeply criticism is implicated in its own sociohistorical life.

Philip Goldstein
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