UNIT 20

Reader-response criticism

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Reader-response criticism is not a unified theory; rather it encompasses a variety of approaches all of which emphasize the reader and the reading process in the critical project. This range can be illustrated through two of the German terms which are often used by adherents of reader-response criticism: *Rezeptionasthetik* and *Wirkungsasthetik* (Freund, 1987, p. 134). 'Reception aesthetics' concentrates upon the audience response, pursuing a more overtly historical thesis, concerned with the reception of works within their contemporary context and the (often dialectical) relationship between the moment of cultural production and consumption. This type of study is most associated with Hans Robert Jauss. In contrast, *wirkung* defines the 'effect and response' engendered by a text and the reading process. This method, developed by Roman Ingarden (Ingarden, 1931) and Wolfgang Iser, is closely associated with the University of Konstanz, where the study of reception aesthetics has been explored systematically, so that sometimes its proponents are referred to as the 'Konstanz School'. Ingarden, Iser, Jauss and their followers all evince a major shift away from the author as the determinant of meaning, consequently introducing a more subjective stance to critical practice, and they share a common, if variously received, intellectual heritage from the German philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Reader-response criticism cannot be grasped without some knowledge of phenomenology.

Phenomenology argued that perception and the role of the perceiver were essential in our comprehension of meaning and reality. Indeed, Husserl, the German philosopher who established and expounded this view, argued that things could only be understood by us through our consciousness, and that the patterns of our perception and consciousness were the proper objects of philosophical study (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 54–61). Phenomenology is named after the Greek word 'phenomena' (meaning 'things appearing'), and this approach emphasizes how we cannot be certain that objects exist, but only of their presence as things intended by consciousness. Consciousness is always of something and Husserl argues that things are intended by our consciousness, that is, the subject imagines and conceptualizes objects, which actually brings those objects into being. Realities are, in fact, phenomena, available only in our consciousness. This consciousness is not of a particular thing, but rather the essence of the thing (for example, colour in general rather than any particular colour).

Phenomenology had a major influence on criticism because its emphasis upon consciousness and the process of perception focused attention on the reader. For critics like George Poulet the book was an inert object which required realization by the consciousness of the reader in order to become a work and function. Poulet imagined reading as the invasion of one consciousness by another (accessed through the work): 'the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer either inside or outside' (Poulet, 1980, p. 42). The reading consciousness will activate the text and so become aware of the author's consciousness and almost inhabit the *lebenswelt* (or lived/perceived world) of the author. Thus phenomenological criticism often highlights the process of perception of time, space, material worlds, and the sense of self, or self–other interaction.

A parallel but contrasting approach was assayed by the Polish critic Roman Ingarden (also influenced by Husserl), who argued that the reader did not surrender to the consciousness of another, but that he/she had to construct that consciousness from elements in the work. Whereas Poulet stressed the work as pure phenomenon and imagined the reader as a passive figure invaded by the consciousness of the work (Poulet, 1980, pp. 43 and 47), Ingarden argued that works were 'heteronomous', that is, they have some inherent properties and some which are attributed to them by the active perceiving consciousness of the reader. The literary work is neither simply ideal nor real; it is between the two, requiring an act of concretization. Ingarden argued that this was achieved through various schemata or points of indeterminacy which must be perceived and realized in the act of reading. In other words, the text is a kind of 'internalized probability system' (William Meyer, cited in Kermode, 1975), like a musical score. The notes provide a skeleton which guides the performer, but they are only fully realized in the performance.

Ingarden argues that the text and its schema, activated by the reader, are the source of meaning, while the most prolific advocate of *Wirkungsasthetik*, Iser, builds upon the notion of texts as a heteronomous formation, arguing that literary texts occupy a 'peculiar halfway position between the external world of objects and the reader's own world of experience' (Iser, 1989, p. 8). Rather than the invasion of the reader's consciousness by the work espoused by Poulet, Iser suggests that meaning comes from the interaction of text and reader. He posits a bi-polarity, of the author's 'artistic' object and the reader's 'aesthetic' object, and that the 'work' exists somewhere between these two possibilities (Iser, 1978, p. 21; 1980a, p. 106; 1989, p. 8). The job of the reader is to interact with the text, composing meaning as reading progresses, and the text aids this process through its structures, an idea Iser adapts from Ingarden's schemata (Iser, 1980a, pp. 111–12). Reading becomes a journey through the text as the reader is offered, and constructs, various perspectives which are then gradually assessed and organized into a coherent whole (Iser, 1989, p. 13).

On a practical level, Iser argues that the text consists of 'gaps', either 'blanks' or 'negations' which are structured into the text, and which the reader must resolve, giving the reader a 'chance to build ... bridges' (1989, p. 9) and offering various interpretive possibilities. If 'blanks are the unseen joints of the text', then negations

'invoke familiar and determinate elements of knowledge only to cancel them out' (1980a, p. 112). So the reader of a novel must work between the various perspectives offered (by narrator, characters, plot and the fictitious or implied reader), deciding at various points of indeterminacy, such as chapter breaks or changes of narrative, direction, how to interpret. As implied here, such an approach works particularly well with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels (Iser, 1980b, contains an exemplary discussion of Tom Jones; see also Selden, 1985, p. 113). It can also work well with drama, since it highlights the pauses and silences which are so significant in the form (Selden, 1989, section 17 on Pinter and Beckett).

For example, a novel like *Great Expectations* maps the concept of 'gentility', or being a gentleman, its various meanings, and how these relate to material wealth and the rapidly changing social structure of the nineteenth century. This is achieved through the metaphorical and literal journey of the central character, Pip, who encounters various figures representing ideas of gentility (Matthew Pocket, Bentley Drummel and Estella and her trainer Miss Havisham) as he learns how to behave as a gentleman. Each figure articulates a different aspect which Pip needs to balance, and these in turn are linked to the question of how money supports and relates to gentility (through Pumblechook, Miss Havisham, the always empty Pocketses, Jaggers and Magwitch). The reader must, with Pip, connect these possibilities together into a coherent pattern, which is complicated by the oscillation between the actions of the plot, apparently in the present but actually in the past, Pip's reactions, and the voice of the narrator, the older Pip (see Unit 18, p. 532). Immediate, or apparently immediate, responses are juxtaposed with the retrospective narration, and the reader again must read the gaps to determine what position – a combination of identification and distantiation – to adopt. These gaps or interpretive cruxes, which the reader must bridge, shape the text in other ways, since the novel is also based upon personal relationships between characters which are divided into kin and step relations, and as the novel progresses these categories become confused and new connections between figures emerge, so that Estella's parentage is revealed or the identity of Pip's mysterious benefactor is uncovered. In this way the text plays with the idea of 'expectations', since we expect certain relations, or are surprised by some, such as the emergence of Magwitch, or tantalized by others, for instance the role of Miss Havisham. Constantly we are made to expect, or asked what are our expectations. These gaps and indeterminacies become an enigma which we as readers continually seek to solve, such as why the plot has the lawyer at its centre, pointing towards the influence of early detective fiction, a device which frustrates and fascinates us. The structure of chapters, the instalments of the serial version, and the interweaving of plot strands, preventing our knowledge or discovery of key facts, add to the delay and dilation of the plot, which heighten our involvement. The idea articulated by Joe Gargery ('Pip, dear old chap, life is made up of ever so many partings welded together' (Dickens, 1994, p. 222)) embodies both the complex patterns of connection and non-connection in the novel, and the subtle coherences and incoherences which we are offered as readers. We are to weld together the partings of the text.

Not all reader-response criticism belongs to continental Europe. The other

major exponent of reader-response criticism, the American theoretician Stanley Fish, develops some of the more radical possibilities of Ingarden's and Iser's work. While both Ingarden and Iser argue that the text structures its own indeterminacy, a structure of internalized probabilities, which cannot be realized by any one reader, Fish pursues an argument which places meaning within the reader rather than in the text or in the literary or linguistic system. His work falls into two broad phases, both showing the influence of phenomenology (and also J.L. Austin's linguistic theories), but the later stage is distinguished by a radical thrust absent in earlier essays. Most of Fish's early work focuses upon Renaissance literature (Fish, 1967 and 1972), showing how the texts generate a self-awareness in the reader of the reading process in order to provoke doubt about the reader's competence and interpretive skills: almost an internalized 'exegetical drama' (Freund, 1987, p. 94).

In *Surprised By Sin* (Fish, 1967) Fish explores Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an educative experience which faces the reader with the plight of fallen man through his inability to interpret and thus also to understand God or his actions. Essays such as 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' (Fish, 1976) explore the constant structuring and restructuring effected in the process of reading. In this case, the plural meanings offered in the *variorum* edition of Milton's shorter poems illustrate how the reader experiences a variety of possible meanings which must be considered, rejected, absorbed, reconsidered in the light of further reading. Fish concerns himself with the micro-levels of reading or

> descriptions of a succession of decisions made by readers about an author's intention; decisions that are not limited to the specifying of purpose but include the specifying of every aspect of successively intended worlds; decisions that are precisely the shape, because they are the content, of the reader's activities. (Fish, 1976, p. 476)

In practical terms this means the critic looks for the interpretive cruxes where such myriad decisions must be made. For instance in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

> Buskins of shells all silvered used she,
> And branched with blushing coral to the knee,
> Where sparrows perched, of hollow pearl and gold,
> Such as the world would wonder to behold:
> Those with sweet water oft her handmaid fills,
> Which as she went would chirrup through the bills.
> (Marlowe, 1979, ll. 31–6)

The lines belong to the opening description of Hero, whose own beauty combined with the astonishing workmanship of her clothes amaze both men and nature, so that bees would seek honey from her breath and men would 'praise the sweet smell as she passed' (line 21), whilst her 'veil was artificial flowers and leaves,/ Whose workmanship both man and beast deceives' (lines 19–20). This description belongs to the well-known Renaissance topos of nature outdone by art, and begins a complex exploration of the power of art and artifice to entrance and so transport the reader into a literal and metaphorical Golden Age. For the poet, the act of rewriting the poem (Marlowe follows an earlier poem attributed to the mythical archetypal poet

Musaeus) itself demonstrates the imitation and surpassing of the earlier model, a tribute to his own brilliance and skilled workmanship. So these lines occur at a crucial moment and serve to embody for the reader how Hero's observers are deceived (and the nature/art boundary blurred), as initially we read the lines as if the buskins of shell are simply covered with branch-like coral. All of a sudden we are told that 'sparrows perched' (line 33) on these branches, throwing the reader's perceptions momentarily into confusion. Are they real sparrows, deceived like the bees? Doesn't this seem incredible, or suggest that Hero is immensely tall (which might be an image of a heroic age)? So how are we to interpret this, literally or metaphorically? These questions and the moment of indecision are then resolved as the passage develops and we are told that the birds are in fact hydraulic automata, themselves, obviously, marvels of workmanship. So the crux and the decisions we are faced with as readers force the realization of the techniques of art to deceive and go beyond nature. Not only is the reader thus alerted to the reading process, an important part of the meaning of the poem which is filled with coded narratives, but the passage equally allows the reader to experience the sensory confusion elicited by Hero's passage.

Fish uses such passages in two ways, making intellectual points about the poem (often working from an apparently insignificant textual detail to a major idea in Renaissance culture), and also showing how reading involves the reader. Indeed, he continues to argue that readers make the meaning of poems just as much as their formal elements and structures and that the reading process and the interpretive process actually constitute the meaning. This is the more radical potential of reader-response criticism, best seen in 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics' (1970), and in the two later essays 'Is There a Text in This Class?' and 'How To Recognise a Poem When You See One' (1980). 'Affective Stylistics' seeks a radical reorientation in critical practice, moving away from the spatial patterns of new criticism, towards a temporal understanding of the text: we should look at the text as an event, as it happens, and how we experience its occurrence (Fish, 1972, pp. 73 and 83). This is what is meant by 'affective'; not an emotional response, but the intellectual, analytical response triggered by the process of making sense of the text as we work through it (p. 74). Critics should stop asking 'What does it mean?', allowing them to ignore whole areas of texts, but rather ask 'What does it do?' (p. 72). Criticism should 'slow down the reading experience' (p. 74) to show how the uncertainties of the text are 'progressively decertainizing' (p. 71).

In 'Affective Stylistics' Fish appeals to the notions of linguistic and literary competence to limit the potential pluralism of meaning introduced by the affective approach, arguing that there are internalized rules within language and within literature which will allow only a certain latitude in interpretation, and will constrain wayward readers. Later essays such as 'Is There a Text in This Class?' abandon such claims and with great panache and glee argue that there are no determinate meanings, and that all meanings are constructed (Fish, 1980, p. 317) by readers. Meaning is irreducibly plural. So for Fish, 'Interpretation is not the act of construing, it is the act of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them' (p. 327). This is the triumph of the reader.

Fish's essays provoke some difficult interpretive questions, especially his insistence that the reader actually constructs the poem. For example, take this simple note:

> This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast – forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet and so cold.

Can this be read as a poem? Fish would argue that it is not the formal or poetic qualities of the writing which make this a poem or not but the way we read it (Fish, 1980, pp. 326–7). As it stands we might read it as a casual note on a fridge with slightly wayward grammar suggestive of haste, and the more alert reader might notice the use of 'icebox' redolent of 1950s America. Yet, if we were to rearrange the words so that it looked like a poem, we would approach the matter in a totally different way, and so read it as if it were a poem, fulfilling Fish's argument that 'It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities' (Fish, 1980, p. 326). So, we can reorder the words thus (Williams, 1969, p. 55):

This Is Just To Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Simply changing the physical arrangement means that we read this as a poem because we expect poems to be organized in this fashion, and so we now read in a particular way, looking for poetic features. For instance, we might emphasize the Christian connotations of 'saving' and 'Forgive me', especially since we would now place greater emphasis upon the phrase which opens a stanza. Fish, however, goes further, using the example of a nonsensical list of names on a classroom blackboard, which his students (who were expecting to talk about seventeenth-century religious poetry) obediently interpreted as if it were a religious lyric:

Jacobs – Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

His point is to show that the different ways of reading encountered here (between what

was actually a reading list and what the students read as a poem) are generated not by any inherent formal or linguistic properties, but by the way the readers approached the different texts, and that 'the mental operations we perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded' (Fish, 1980, p. 331). He argues that all meaning is 'communal and conventional' and that it is the 'interpretive communities' (in this case of academia) who generate the protocols by which we read (p. 321). Fish's later writings explore the workings of such interpretive communities, especially in the creation of legal discourses, which have become a site of major intellectual and political debate in contemporary America (Fish, 1989, pp. 141–60).

Fish's theories of reading are highly contradictory in that they appear to posit the dominance of the reader in interpretation, yet his reader is a curious fish, apparently unable ever to learn to read a full sentence without falling into its traps or ambiguities; and as this reader becomes more active so he/she (paradoxically) becomes increasingly subject to the manipulations of the author (Culler, 1983, pp. 65–71). The most important issue, of control (that is, who organizes meaning), is not really addressed, while the appeal to the notion of a unified reading experience in the interpretive community discounts the variety possible within an interpretive community: must all women trained in academic reading approach texts in the same ways as men? Despite these problems the opportunities offered by reader-response criticism are immense, particularly since it highlights the ways different readers approach texts and so enfranchises the divergent readings of groups such as women, those from ethnic minorities or gay men (Culler, 1983, Ch. 1). Moreover, Fish's interest in the communal and conventional nature of interpretive protocols highlights the link between ideology and reading. If interpretation is a socially constructed process, then it is legitimate to ask by whom and for what ends and upon what basis are interpretations generated.

Perhaps the most exciting possibilities are offered by the gradual merging of two approaches (to the historical limits of reading and to the psychology of the process) in the work of the new historians of reading. Critics such as Tompkins (1980b) and Jauss have pointed the way forward using a historically oriented approach. Jauss explores how the 'horizons of expectation' of the audience contemporary to a work are transformed or fulfilled by contact with the work, and he sees reception theory as a bridge between historical and textual approaches (Jauss, 1982, pp. 24 and 18). For Jauss the 'history of literature is a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader' (Jauss, 1982, p. 21), so that

> Significance, which is unlocked through aesthetic experience, arises from the convergence of effect [*Wirkung*] and reception. It is no atemporal, basic element which is always already given; rather it is the never completed result of the process of progressive and enriching interpretation, which concretizes – in an ever new and different manner – the textually immanent potential for meaning in the change of historical life-worlds. (Jauss, 1979, p. 183)

Such approaches can be assimilated to the broad historical project of understanding how individual readers read (and still read) texts, and how we can construct a more

complex history of reading (Darnton, 1986). Cultural historians such as Roger Chartier have used the interactions of readers and texts to consider how popular culture operated in the early modern era, reading each moment of cultural consumption as another moment of cultural production (Chartier, 1984), while the medievalist Brian Stock examines how texts spread through 'textual communities', where the interpretation and knowledge of particular texts shape the behaviour of religious groups and societies, inculcating group consciousness and solidarity (Stock, 1990, also 1983). Within literary studies, the lasting effect has been the liberation of criticism from the constraints of patriarchal conceptions of authorship (Culler, 1983, p. 60). The 'death' of the author, argues Barthes, is the 'birth of the reader' (Barthes, 1977). Reader-response criticism thus marks a major shift in perceptions and functions as the necessary precursor to many later critical approaches, placing a new emphasis upon the radical potential of reading and systems by which meanings are created. The shift to the reader prefigures feminism, post-colonialism, gay criticism in its focus upon the divergences between readers; the consideration of reading as a process and the generation of meaning underpins structuralist and poststructuralist approaches; and the interaction of these two emphases, upon how meaning is created, for whom and by whom, also underlies much recent Marxist discussion of the ideological production and function of the institution and discipline of criticism. Asking who reads, how, for what reasons and with what results are the fundamentals of any self-reflexive and self-critical interpretive practice and as such form the basis of modern literary criticism.

The best introductory collections of reader-response criticism are Tompkins (1980a) and Suleiman and Crosman (1980), both of which provide a range of essays including Iser's 'Interaction between Text and Reader' (Suleiman and Crosman) and Fish's 'Literature in the Reader' (Tompkins), along with stimulating and accessible introductions. Other student-friendly texts include Iser's 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction' (Miller, 1971, and Iser, 1989) and Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Fish, 1980). An excellent (advanced) exposition is given in Freund (1987), and interesting critiques can be found in Eagleton (1983) and Ray (1984).

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