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Reviewed Work: Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism by Jane P. Tompkins

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Reading in Critical Theory

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The cartoon on the cover of *Reader-Response Criticism* shows two people reading over the shoulders of a third person. Each reader is responding differently to the text—one onlooker is laughing, the other crying, and the holder of the book seems absorbed but otherwise unexpressive. This cartoon nicely captures a central problem addressed by reader-response critics: How can we explain different responses to the same literary work? I will return to this question below, but I would first like to re-use the cartoon as an emblem for my own comments on *Reader-Response Criticism*. The three pictured responses to one book suggest that a text can offer several readings to its interpreters. In what follows I will discuss the three ways *Reader-Response Criticism* asks to be read: as an introduction to a new critical approach; as a metacritical description of that approach; and as a critique of the approach and the critical tradition out of which it emerges.

  Jane Tompkins' excellent collection is above all a useful introduction to current talk about readers in literary theory, talk that supports a new focus on readers reading in practical criticism. Within the Anglo-American tradition, twentieth-century intrinsic criticism successfully displaced a reader-oriented emphasis in favor of exclusive attention to the autonomous literary text. Though I. A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, Louise Rosenblatt, and D. W. Harding kept the reader from completely disappearing during the hegemony of New Critical formalism, the prohibition against the "Affective Fallacy" did suppress talk about readers in both critical theory and practice. Tompkins' anthology shows how the reader appeared prominently once again in critical discourse. She reprints

influential essays by Walker Gibson, Gerald Prince, Michael Riffaterre, Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and Walter Michaels, and important chapters from books by Jonathan Culler and David Bleich. As an introduction to reader-response criticism, this collection does more than simply reproduce a pre-existent literary approach. *Reader-Response Criticism* actually attempts to define a critical "movement" and therefore helps establish and disseminate it as well. Tompkins' introductory and concluding essays and her comprehensive bibliography make significant contributions to this attempt, but it is her skillful selection of articles that is most important to my reading of her book as an introduction. Some highlights of this first reading follow.

The essays by Gibson, Prince, and Riffaterre show how the reader can be reintroduced into formalist discussions of the literary work. Gibson's "mock reader" and Prince's "narratee" identify readers implied by or inscribed in the text, while Riffaterre's "superreader" simply locates textual units that are active in poetic structure. It is with Poulet's essay, "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," that we really move from text to reader, or more exactly, from reader as textual function to the reading process itself. How does the reader interact with the text? How can this interaction be described? These are the questions that concern most of the theorists in *Reader-Response Criticism.*

I can best summarize Poulet's essay by taking on the first-person pronoun that figures so prominently in his argument: In reading, my consciousness is filled by the author's consciousness existing in the literary work. I think thoughts not my own, while I "live, from the inside, in a certain identity with the work and the work alone." There is a fusion of consciousnesses, a sharing in which "the consciousness inherent in the work is active and potent" and I "record passively all that is going on in me." Reading becomes an act in which "the subjective principle which I call *I,* is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I.*"

Poulet's description of the reading process is troubling when placed in the context of the reader-response essays that follow it. In fact, despite its emphasis on authorial consciousness, Poulet's explicit theory of reading strangely recalls the reading model *implied* by Anglo-American New Criticism. Like Poulet, the New Critics assumed that the literary text somehow imprinted itself on the reader's consciousness—the text just took over. Both Poulet and the New Critics posit a reader who effaces himself before the text so it can do its work; both believe in a *passive* reader acted upon rather than acting. It is this fiction of the passive reader that Iser, Fish, Culler, Holland, and Bleich reject in their essays.

Wolfgang Iser's "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" makes use of Poulet's article but puts it in a new theoretical framework. For Iser, the written part of the text leaves gaps that the reader's imagination must fill, resulting in a dynamic process of interaction between reader and

text. Besides a constant interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, the reader also engages in a search for a consistent pattern in the text, a "gestalt" that normally takes on the fixed outline of illusion. However, the polysemantic nature of the text opposes the illusion-making of the reader; the "configurative meaning" formed by the reader is always accompanied by "alien associations" that do not fit. Consistency-building and -breaking entangle the reader in the text's gestalt, and this entanglement opens up the reader to the workings of the text as he leaves behind his own preconceptions. In doing so, the reader thinks the thoughts of another; he "internalizes" the ideas of the author in a process ultimately different from what Poulet describes.

Iser's essay provides a wide-ranging theoretical discussion of his phenomenological approach to reader-response criticism. The general nature of the discussion leaves many questions unanswered; for example: How does the "written part" of the text impose what Iser calls "limits on its unwritten implications"? What exactly is the relation between "configurative meaning" and "illusion"? Iser answers these and other questions in the most detailed presentation of his model, *The Act of Reading,* a book which continues this essay's strategy of offering a little something for everybody in current literary theory.[1] There are interpretive constraints in the text (schematized views, textual perspectives) for traditional formalists and there are spaces encouraging a reader's interpretive freedom (textual gaps or blanks) for the champions of the reader. There is determinacy (the written part of the text) for objective critics and indeterminacy (the unwritten part of the text) for deconstructionists. There are idiosyncratic components to response (individual dispositions) for psychological reading theorists and intersubjective components (the repertoire) for sociological reading theorists. There is also a temporal as well as a spacial model of interpretation. And finally the book (though not the essay) provides both a privatized view of reading and a social context for the literary work. The fact that critical theorists as different as Monroe Beardsley and Hans-Robert Jauss have found Iser's reading model attractive testifies to the persuasive success of his multifaceted project. I have elsewhere argued that this very success works against Iser's actual importance for initiating change in contemporary literary study.[2]

Along with Iser, Stanley Fish and Jonathan Culler are probably the reader theorists most widely read in the United States. Fish's "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" presents a temporal reading model which calls attention to the sequence of acts performed by the reader in response to the text. Fish has used this model in several impressive examples of practical criticism, especially *Surprised by Sin* and *Self-Consuming Artifacts.*[3] "Literature in the Reader" explains the assumptions underlying these descriptions of "the structure of the reader's experience." Fish here defines "the reader" as "the informed reader," one whose linguistic and

literary competence enables him to have the experience the text provides. Culler takes as his project a description of the literary competence Fish merely assumes in "Literature in the Reader" and his other early work.

Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* attempts to define the procedures and conventions readers use to make sense of literary texts.[4] Focusing on the activity of reading, he uses structuralist insights to describe the interpretive operations on which literature, as an institution, depends. Tompkins reprints Culler's central chapter on literary competence, which he defines as "what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature." In his more recent book, *The Pursuit of Signs,* Culler admits that the competence he describes might be "confined to a tiny community of professional critics" and that other interpretive communities might have different norms.[5] These suggestions take a step toward answering the charge that Culler's notion of literary competence is too static and exclusionary.

In contrast to Culler's social model of reading conventions, Holland's and Bleich's psychological theories emphasize the *individual* reader. Holland's essay, "Unity   Identity   Text   Self," outlines his view that people always express their different identity themes in reading. Holland has most fully developed this "transactive" approach in *Poems in Persons* and *5 Readers Reading.*[6] Bleich's "Epistemological Assumptions in the Study of Response" belongs more appropriately to my second reading of Tompkins' collection as metacritical commentary, since the essay primarily discusses other reader-oriented projects. However, this extract from Bleich's *Subjective Criticism* also presents the author's own form of reader-response theory. Bleich develops this theory first in *Readings and Feelings* and more completely in *Subjective Criticism.*[7] Both books demonstrate that Bleich's attention to response grows out of his pedagogical concerns. Interested in how individual students read literature and how they share their responses in the classroom, Bleich proposes a three-step model. The reader first symbolizes the work in a perceptual and affective response. Then this initial response calls for an explanation, resulting in an act of resymbolization by the reader; Bleich points out that this resymbolization is an interpretation of the reader's subjective response, not of some objective text. Finally, the reader shares his response and interpretation within a community where he negotiates his "response statement" into knowledge of self, literature, and language. Though most often seen as psychological and individualistic, Bleich's evolving theory now appears to stress sociological and communal issues. Earlier, especially in *Readings and Feelings,* Bleich emphasized individual response; in sections of *Subjective Criticism* and after, he focuses more on communal negotiation, as the present essay illustrates. I have elsewhere criticized Bleich's central notion of negotiation for what I take to be an incomplete account of the move from individual response to communal

consensus.[8] However, Bleich is beginning to address this problem, and it is possible that his growing emphasis on communities might encourage him to give up the absolute priority of the individual self in interpretation.

The most challenging selection in *Reader-Response Criticism* is Fish's "Interpreting the *Variorum*." Despite its precise prose and distinct ideas, the essay remains difficult because of the radical adjustments it demands from its reader. Fish reprints "Interpreting the *Variorum*" in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, where he supplies section headings that usefully describe the required changes in focus.[9] The first two sections are called "The Case for Reader-Response Analysis," and they again present Fish's argument for the temporal reading model and critical approach he had detailed in "Literature in the Reader." But in the third section, "Undoing the Case for Reader-Response Analysis," Fish abandons the descriptive claims for his Affective Stylistics and its priority over formalist and other critical methodologies, a priority he had persuasively argued for in the first two sections. Instead, in section III he contends that all critical approaches are simply different interpretive strategies creating what they pretend to find. Then in section IV, "Interpretive Communities," Fish develops this hermeneutic theory further: interpretive strategies are always communal, never idiosyncratic; therefore interpretation in reading is constrained by the strategies made available through membership in different interpretive communities. Interpretive communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions."

There appears to be a problem here. In section III Fish abandons descriptive claims but in section IV he is back describing the reading process. How can Fish claim to describe reading when he has just said that such descriptions are disguised interpretations that fill the category of "reading" rather than capturing some pre-existent process? Fish does not give his reader much help here. However, the solution to the problem turns out to be simple: both the third and fourth sections consistently talk about interpretation, but the interpreter discussed changes. In section III the interpreter is the *critic* whose interpretation constitutes the text, the reading experience, or the author's intention. In section IV the interpreter is the *reader* whose interpretive strategies constitute the text he is reading. In other words, in the third section reading is an *object* of interpretation, and in the final section reading *is* interpretation. Thus, the reader of "Interpreting the *Variorum*" has had to make three major adjustments in following Fish's argument: sections I and II encourage the reader to accept Affective Stylistics as the most privileged, most objective of critical approaches; section III then asks the reader to give up the priority of Affective Stylistics and see it as a critical interpretation that creates what it previously (in sections I and II) claimed to describe; and finally section IV requires the reader to move from criticism back to reading in order to see

that reading itself is an interpretive process that creates (rather than interacts with) the literary text. Making these difficult adjustments poses a challenge for the article's reader, but it is a challenge well worth meeting because "Interpreting the *Variorum*" stands out as perhaps the most valuable contribution to this fine collection of essays.

I can conclude this first reading of Tompkins' anthology by returning to the question suggested by its cover cartoon: why do readers respond differently to the "same" text? Gibson and Prince imply that varied responses are due to readers' different capabilities in recognizing the mock reader's or narratee's guiding function in a work. Riffaterre claims that the *fact* of response to the same poetic structure is common to normal readers, but he acknowledges that the *content* of that reaction might differ according to a reader's "culture, era, esthetics, personality" or it might *seem* to differ because a certain reader rationalizes "his responses to fit into his sphere of interest and its technical terminology." Poulet implies either that there is no significant variety in response or that diverse responses could result from the reader's success or failure in allowing the work to take over and displace the self during reading. Iser sees various concretizations as due to readers filling textual gaps differently according to their individual dispositions. The early Fish denies that informed readers have varied responses (they all read the same way) but admits that they do respond differently to their responses (liking or disliking their shared reading experiences); that is, responses don't differ but responses to response do. Bleich and Holland make variety in reading experiences the center of their theories and explain that variety by positing different subjectivities or identity themes. Culler rejects such radical discrepancies between reading experiences and claims instead that readers with literary competence share reading conventions that provide a (relatively narrow) range of acceptable interpretations. And finally, in his revised theory, Fish argues that readers read differently when they belong to diverse interpretive communities. In answer to the question, why do readers respond to the same text differently?, Fish claims they are not actually responding to the *same* text; rather, representatives from different interpretive communities constitute different texts even when they appear (from some other interested perspective) to be reading the same one.

As an attempt to establish and disseminate reader-response criticism, Tompkins' anthology presents a good selection of articles, a helpful introductory essay, and the most comprehensive, annotated bibliography yet published. Anyone interested in learning about reader-oriented theory can best begin by approaching it through *Reader-Response Criticism.* In light of this first reading of the book as an introduction, Tompkins does make one mistake: she fails to note that Michaels' essay is not really an example of reader-response criticism or theory. It is, rather, an incisive comment on one problem within several contemporary approaches, including reader-oriented criticism. Michaels uses C. S. Peirce's reading of Descartes

to reject two prominent accounts of textual interpretation: one based on "a notion of the self free to assert its subjectivity without constraint" (à la Bleich, Holland, and M. H. Abrams' version of J. Hillis Miller) and the other based on "a notion of the self wiped clean of prejudice and ready to accept determinate meaning" (in the work of Abrams and E. D. Hirsch). These two positions "are simply the flip sides of the context-free self, active and passive; one generates any interpretation it pleases, the other denies that it interprets at all." Opposing such claims, Michaels advocates Peirce's view that the interpreter's self "is already embedded in a context, the community of interpretation or system of signs." Informed by a post-structuralist reading of American pragmatism, Michaels' essay is an exceedingly lucid discussion of a controversial issue in current literary theory. Though it is not specifically a piece of reader-response criticism, it does provide a perspective on that critical theory and thus forms part of the second way *Reader-Response Criticism* can be read—as a metacritical description.

In my first reading, Tompkins' collection tells the story of the appearance and disappearance of the individual reader. Emerging from the text (in Gibson, Prince, and Riffaterre), the individual reader interacts with the text in the various plots of reader-response criticism (in Poulet, Iser, Bleich, Holland, and early Fish). The individual reader then disappears again as he becomes either the anonymous crossroads of shared reading conventions (in Culler) or the predetermined extension of an interpretive community (in later Fish). Michaels' essay does not fit into this story unless it is seen as an ironic coda showing that the appearance of the individual reader (active and passive) was an illusion all the time, a dream-vision built on the fanciful assumption of a context-free self.

My second reading of *Reader-Response Criticism* as metacritical commentary produces a different story than the rise and fall of the individual reader. This new tale is a narrative about the transformations of the reader reading. From the perspective offered in the concluding three essays by Fish, Michaels, and Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism* is a complex discussion and illustration of the various ways "the reader" can be used as an interpretive device. "The reader" now becomes either a category in *literary theory* filled by the interpretive assumptions of different reader-response critics or a tool in *practical criticism* for talking about the literary work. With the reader serving as a theoretical category, the essays change into a procession of the reader's different disguises—formalist, semiotic, phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and structuralist—concluding with the reader's unmasking in post-structuralism. Reader-response critics fill the category of the reader differently according to the interpretive assumptions of their different theoretical discourses. This means that the "reading process" is not prior to and independent of those discourses; rather, as interpretation, reader-response theory constitutes the process it claims to be neutrally describing. Portraying "the reader" as a theoretical

category or analytical tool, my second reading of *Reader-Response Criticism* focuses attention on the *interpretive conventions* involved in critical discussions of the literary reading process. Thus, Tompkins' volume becomes more than an introduction to reader theory; it now appears as a unique survey of contemporary critical approaches, applying these approaches to the reading process instead of the text.

The third way of reading this volume requires a shift from metacritical *description* to metacritical *evaluation*. The perspective for this final reading is provided by the concluding pages of Tompkins' "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," the last essay in the collection. In this truly impressive article (published here for the first time), Tompkins situates current reader-response criticism in the history of literary theory. She convincingly demonstrates that contemporary reader-oriented criticism "owes nothing to the ancient rhetorical tradition it seems at first to resemble, and almost everything to the formalist doctrines it claims to have overturned." The consequence of taking Tompkins' essay and certain items in her bibliography as the basis of my third reading is that *Reader-Response Criticism* becomes an attack on the American critical tradition and on reader criticism itself because of what both continue to exclude from critical discourse.

In her essay, Tompkins shows how New Criticism established the priority of textual explication for literary study in the twentieth century. New Critics viewed the text as a possessor of structured meaning and then privileged the critical activity which discovered that meaning. Current American criticism has simply assumed this privileging of critical interpretation. As Tompkins puts it, "What is most striking about reader-response criticism and its close relative, deconstructive criticism, is their failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication." I do not entirely agree with Tompkins here. Reader-response criticism does in fact suggest some alternatives to the traditional projects of American criticism. Citing just those critics anthologized, Holland and Bleich's psychological studies of reading do not easily fit into the traditional mold, and Culler has explicitly rejected explication as the most important critical activity in favor of a literary theory that describes how readers and critics make sense of texts.[10] Still, the main point of Tompkins' assertion is well-taken: the most influential reader-response critics—e.g., Iser and early Fish—are those who apply their approaches in critical interpretations. Indeed, reader-oriented criticism tends toward business as usual within the institution of literary studies. For those who seek to change the institution, reader-response criticism and theory is ultimately a disappointment.

The most disturbing fact about current reader-oriented criticism is its strikingly *depoliticized* nature. In a footnote to her introduction, Tompkins mentions German reception aesthetics—especially the work of Hans Robert Jauss—among the significant omissions from her anthology, and

she lists several items on *Rezeptionsästhetik* in her bibliography. Reception study focuses on the different historical concretizations of literary works and provides a history of literary consumption that balances the dominant literary histories of production. Jauss's model of reception and impact specifies that a work is actualized according to the intra- and extra-literary horizons of readers' expectations. The inclusion of *extra-literary* horizons sets Jauss's project off from most reader-response approaches, which focus exclusively on intra-literary horizons. The omission of Jauss from Tompkins' collection is therefore a symptom of the more general exclusion within reader-oriented theory as a whole: the missing discussions of political, historical, and social contexts of reading. It is a testimony to the apolitical nature of the dominant critical tradition that most reader-response criticism is rigorously depoliticized, often ahistorical, and only narrowly social. I mean "apolitical" in two senses here: the depoliticized use of the reader as an interpretive device in practical criticism and literary history, and the neglect of power relations in descriptions within literary theory, e.g., the omission of accounts and histories of literary study's institutional dynamics.

In *Reader-Response Criticism* only Tompkins' "The Reader in History" notes that current reader criticism lacks a political aspect. In fact, her essay provides an insightful reason for this lack. Because New Criticism established the institutional terms for literary study, reader-response criticism has simply assumed the New Critical conception of literature as "an object of interpretation" and therefore views response as "a way of arriving at meaning, and not as a form of political and moral behavior." If Tompkins is correct here—and I think she is—reader-response criticism is just another form of what Edward Said has called apolitical "functionalism," a critical discourse that talks "about what a text does, how it works, how it has been put together to do certain things, how the text is a wholly integrated and equilibrated system, and so forth." The problem with such functionalism is that it neglects the work's "materiality," the text's "situation in the world."[11] The result is that "the text becomes idealized, essentialized, instead of remaining as the very special kind of cultural object which it really is, with a causation, persistence, durability, and social presence quite its own." Some of the questions Said wants answered can only be approached through a truly historical and materialistic reception aesthetics based on a politically-articulate reader-response criticism: How is the literary text "a monument, a cultural object sought after, fought over, possessed, rejected, or achieved in time"? What is the range of the text's authority? "Why does a text enjoy currency at one time, recurrency at others, oblivion at others?"[12] These and other political questions are not answered nor even asked by most reader-response critics.

However, I cannot leave this charge without mentioning an implicit defense supplied by Tompkins' "The Reader in History." The reading models proposed in *Reader-Response Criticism* suggest that reading takes

place in a political vacuum; that is, they suggest that reading literature is a process with no political constraints or effects. Tompkins does not specifically point this out, but she does say that for reader-response criticism the "text remains an object rather than an instrument, an occasion for the elaboration of meaning rather than a force exerted upon the world." Furthermore, she presents an account that I can use to explain and even justify the depoliticized nature of reader-response models. Tompkins describes how literature before the nineteenth century played an important role in the social and political world. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries literature and social life became more and more separated. The questions addressed by reader-response criticism, Tompkins argues, "do not arise until artistic activity has become cut off from the centers of political life and the art product loses its power to influence public opinion on matters of national importance." Such an argument can be used to justify the apolitical reading models of current reader criticism: these models merely reflect the privatized, "contemplative" reading experiences of modern times. But has literature really been politically and socially impotent during the last 180 years? More exactly, have reading experiences truly taken place in a political or social vacuum? Tompkins' own exceptional work on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[13] testifies against her argument here; as does the phenomena of political and ethical censorship by local school boards and national authoritarian governments.

Less debatable are Tompkins' concluding remarks on power relations. In the last pages of "The Reader in History," she shifts her attention from reader-response criticism to the metacritical theory in Fish's and Michaels' essays (which I described in my second reading above). Tompkins defines this theory as based on the belief that all language "is constitutive of the reality it purports to describe." A study of language grounded in this assumption "necessarily takes on a political character." As Tompkins persuasively argues, such a study in critical theory must be concerned with "the relations of discourse and power." More specifically: "What makes one set of perceptual strategies or literary conventions win out over another? If the world is the product of interpretation, then who or what determines which interpretive system will prevail?" These are important questions, not only for reader-response critics but, as Tompkins suggests, for *all* literary theorists.

Given all or any of the three readings I have proposed, *Reader-Response Criticism* stands out as a significant contribution to contemporary critical theory. A high compliment paid to editors of such volumes is that they not only present an approach but also give their readers tools for evaluating it. Jane Tompkins accomplishes this task admirably for reader-response criticism and for the critical tradition it both revises and maintains.

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NOTES

 1 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).
 2 Steven Mailloux, "How to Be Persuasive in Literary Theory: The Case of Wolfgang Iser," *Centrum,* N.S. 1 (1981), 65-73.
 3 Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971); *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972).
 4 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975).
 5 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 73, 51.
 6 Norman N. Holland, *Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973); *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975).
 7 David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1975); *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).
 8 Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: "The Reader" in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, forthcoming), ch. 1.
 9 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 148-73.
10 Jonathan Culler, "Beyond Interpretation: The Prospects of Contemporary Criticism," *Comparative Literature,* 28 (1976), 244-56.
11 Edward W. Said, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," in *Directions for Criticism,* ed. Murray Krieger and L. S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1977), pp. 38, 43, 46.
12 Said, pp. 43, 45.
13 Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," *Glyph,* 8 (1981), 79-102.