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# Reviewed Work: The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation by Susan R. Suleiman, Inge Crosman

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Ezra Pound—in “a mass of nomenclatures completely unstuck from reality.” In this respect, it resembles most of the work now being done in literary theory: the trend is toward theory for its own sake, theory that has lost contact with criticism and pedagogy and that sees its existence as wholly self-justifying and self-contained.

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THE READER IN THE TEXT: ESSAYS ON AUDIENCE AND INTERPRETATION. Edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980. vii, 441 p.

The aim of *The Reader in the Text* is “to explore fundamental questions about the status—be it semiotic, sociological, hermeneutic, subjective—of the audience in relation to the artistic text” (p. vii). Besides sixteen original essays on this relationship, the volume contains a general introduction by Susan Suleiman, a useful bibliography by Inge Crosman, and helpful subject and name indexes for the collection as a whole. Suleiman’s knowledgeable introduction presents one of the best overviews of reader-oriented criticism currently available. Her typology makes the reviewer’s task much easier by providing a convenient framework for discussing the various essays in *The Reader in the Text*.

Suleiman’s first category encompasses *rhetorical* perspectives which view the literary text “as a form of communication” (p. 7). For such approaches reading is “a process of decoding what has by various means been encoded in the text,” and what matters most to rhetorical critics like Wayne Booth is the “ethical and ideological content of the message” (p. 8). This emphasis on content and its effects distinguishes rhetorical critics from their close relatives, the semioticians and structuralists, who focus on the underlying formal systems or codes that make the message intelligible.

Two of the stronger essays in the collection fit into the category of rhetorical criticism: Peter Rabinowitz’ “‘What’s Hecuba to Us?’ The Audience’s Experience of Literary Borrowing” and Michel Beaujour’s “Exemplary Pornography: Barrès, Loyola, and the Novel.” Beaujour develops an especially instructive discussion of literary effects as he defines and analyzes the “exemplary novel.” On one level, this kind of novel “is also a *method*: it provides educational models, and it fulfills a rhetorical function insofar as it presents exempla of social, ethical, political conduct” (p. 344). Beaujour places his analysis within the critical tradition that sees literature as encoding messages “which affect not only the subjective world view of readers, but their [social] attitudes and actions.” From this perspective, “novels are presumed capable of endangering (or reinforcing) the structure of society and the legal order” (p. 325). Such a rhetorical perspective is a welcome corrective to the dominant view of the volume’s other essays, which imply that reading literature is an aesthetically self-contained and therefore socially inconsequential activity.

Suleiman’s second category of audience-oriented criticism includes *structuralist* and *semiotic* approaches that analyze “the multiple codes and conventions that make possible a text’s *readability*” (p. 11). This category is the most fully represented, both in the collection and in the bibliography. Among the essays in this generous selection is Jonathan Culler’s convincing “Prolegomena to a Theory of

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Reading," which focuses on the shared "interpretive operations applied in reading" (p. 49). Culler describes some of these reading conventions as tropological strategies, noting, for instance, that "one must think of irony not just as a technique available to authors but as a trope or interpretive operation available to readers whenever they encounter problems which it might help to solve" (p. 60). He concludes his essay arguing that such tropological reversals of meaning (e.g., shifting to the ironic) are "inherent in the possibilities of reading, in the possibilities of literary language as we know it" (p. 66). There is a nice ambiguity here concerning the primary source of figural reversibility: Is it in the language of the text or in the conventional operations of reading? This ambiguity allows Culler to avoid what Walter Michaels describes as naïve realism—the notion that textual givens determine a reader's interpretation—and its obverse, radical conventionalism—the notion that a reader's interpretive conventions constitute the textual "givens."

Suleiman's third category consists of *phenomenological* approaches to the interaction of reader and text. These approaches attempt "to describe and account for the mental processes that occur as a reader advances through a text and derives from it—or imposes on it—a pattern" (p. 22). As his essay in the collection testifies, Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological project begins with a search for the basic conditions governing interaction. Among "the guiding devices operative in the reading process" are the structured blanks in the text which "stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text" (pp. 110-12). Elsewhere I have analyzed the problems with Iser's seductively eclectic model of reading (see *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982, Ch. ii). I simply want to raise one additional question here: Iser points out differences between the text-reader relationship and the dyadic interaction of social partners in a face-to-face situation. One of the differences he notes is that dyadic interaction has "specific purposes" which form a "regulative context" for the interaction, whereas "no such frame of reference" governs the text-reader relationship (p. 109). Does Iser mean here that reading takes place in some acontextual space without purposes? If so, his theory ignores many of the social, political, and ideological structures within which reading always occurs. Indeed, readers never read without purposes, and those purposes form part of the context that determines meaning-production.

The psychological perspectives of David Bleich and Norman Holland typify the approaches in Suleiman's fourth category of audience-oriented criticism. Their *subjective and psychoanalytic* accounts describe how personality affects the reading experiences of actual readers. Though Bleich's subjective criticism differs on several points from Holland's transactive approach, both reader-theorists emphasize the psychological and idiosyncratic in readers' responses, and both view reading (initially) as much more of a private experience than other reader-oriented critics. In his contribution to this volume, Holland uses the space of "The Purloined Letter" to transact the story in terms of personal associations from his past, present identifications with characters, and commentary on Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan's psychoanalytic reading of Poe's tale. All these associations and juxtapositions make for great fun, but it is clear that such "open" criticism (p. 353n) requires a gamester as skillful as Holland in order to be entertaining. More importantly, as a *theory* of reading, Holland's model fails to provide an account of the "public interpretive processes" that constitute reading—a point Culler makes in his critique of Holland's work (p. 56).

I wish *The Reader in the Text* contained more selections from Suleiman's fifth category—*sociological-historical* approaches. Unfortunately, this is the reader-oriented perspective that receives the least attention in the collection. Suleiman lists Iser and Karlheinz Stierle under this category, but both of their essays are limited to describing the reading process independent of social and historical contexts. In contrast, Jacques Leenhardt's "Toward a Sociology of Reading" discusses a sociodemographic study of literary reception in France and Hungary. Besides establishing national patterns of interpretation, Leenhardt's study also suggests that systems of reading as "structured ideological frameworks" can be further analyzed in terms of sociodemographic parameters such as age, social mobility, and schooling. Though Leenhardt's essay is the only piece representing the sociological-historical approach to reading, Suleiman's introduction does describe Hans-Robert Jauss's important *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Jauss's histories of reception "reconstruct, using both extrinsic and intrinsic data, the horizon of expectations that existed when a given work first appeared" (p. 36). Suleiman correctly points out the need for reception histories to consider "*different* horizons of expectations co-existing among different publics in any one society" (p. 37)—a fact that Leenhardt's essay helps to establish.

Suleiman adds a final category—*hermeneutic*—to her classification system, and in this category she places the work of post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida and "the new Yale critics," J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. Though I find it difficult to disagree with any part of her masterful overview, I must question Suleiman's decision to include deconstruction as a variety of audience-oriented criticism, for this brand of "negative hermeneutics" shares very little with the reader-response approaches in her five other categories. Indeed, the post-structuralist perspective she delineates here is actually a metacritical stance pointing to the theoretical controversies underlying reader-oriented *and* other forms of contemporary criticism as well. Suleiman appears to recognize the inappropriateness of her final category when she notes, "What I call the hermeneutic variety of audience-oriented criticism is . . . , in a broader sense, the self-conscious moment of all criticism, when criticism turns to reflect on its own intentions, assumptions, and positions" (p. 38). Exactly. And that is precisely why her final category is not really a category of audience-oriented criticism at all. However, Suleiman does provide a lucid account of deconstruction and its radical questioning of "the text" and "the writing or reading subject," concepts central to all descriptions of reading. Thus, even though deconstruction is not a reader-centered perspective, discussing it is necessary for a full understanding of how that perspective fits into the context of recent critical theory. In the discussion of her final category, then, Suleiman turns a mistake in classification into a discerning piece of required exposition.

Finally, there are two topics which might have received more attention throughout *The Reader in the Text*: the constrictions of power and the powers of deconstruction. These topics are at the center of critical debate today and can be elaborated as reader-oriented questions in this way: How is reading constrained and motivated by forms of power within historical contexts? And how can accounts of reading survive recent deconstructions of the assumptions grounding most reader-response approaches—the unified subject, the priority of coherence, the readerly text of determinate effects? Except for Suleiman's introduction and a few other essays, *The Reader in the Text* neglects these questions. But ultimately this fact does not negate the value of the collection as a whole. *The Reader in the Text* presents us with good essays that indicate many of the directions audience-

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oriented criticism can and will take as it develops in the 1980s. For this reason and for Suleiman's enlightening introduction, I heartily recommend the volume.

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LA LITTÉRATURE BRÉSILIENNE. By Luciana Stegagno Picchio. Trans. Luc-François Granier. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981. 127 p.

In the Preface to his book *The Discarded Image* C. S. Lewis remarks that "to be always looking at the map when there is a fine prospect before you shatters the 'wise passiveness' in which landscape ought to be enjoyed. But to consult a map before we set out has no such ill effect. Indeed it will lead us to many prospects; including some we might never have found by following our noses."<sup>1</sup> *La Littérature brésilienne* is just such a map.

There is no danger that it will serve as a substitute for reading the works of the Brazilian writers themselves. Its length—122 pages of text, some 40,000 words—leaves no room for detailed interpretations of individual works; the most important writers must be dealt with in a few paragraphs or even in a single paragraph. The greatest of them all, the nineteenth-century novelist and short-story writer Machado de Assis, is allotted only six pages. The brief sections devoted to individual writers and literary movements are not, however, merely so many encyclopedia entries strung together in more or less chronological order. The book is designed to be read as a whole, not consulted as a work of reference. It offers a framework—now historical, now sociological, now biographical—into which individual works can be fitted. There is a real danger that a reader may err in thinking a foreign writer more isolated than in fact he was. The stylistic innovations of a Guimarães Rosa need to be seen against the background of the linguistic experiments carried out by the Brazilian Modernists of the 1920s, most brilliantly—and most self-consciously—by Mário de Andrade. Conversely, the full splendor of Machado de Assis' achievement becomes all the more remarkable when set against his three-fold isolation—social, psychological, and artistic—from the currents which dominated Brazilian literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Stegagno Picchio's passing references to dozens of writers whose works are available only in Portuguese and hence inaccessible to most foreign readers do not spring from a desire for encyclopedic completeness but from the need to show her readers that Brazilian literature is not to be equated with the handful of writers—Machado, Guimarães Rosa, Jorge Amado—whose names have been made familiar through translations. Every "minor" literature runs the danger of being reduced to the works of one or two writers; for many English-speaking readers, Argentine literature means Borges as Modern Greek means Cavafy, thanks in part to the excellent work done by their translators. The danger is greater in the case of an "underdeveloped" country; Stegagno Picchio is probably wise to remind her reader that "le Brésil est un pays de 120 millions d'habitants [et] les poètes y fleurissent partout" (p. 112).

*La Littérature brésilienne* should interest readers of *CL* both as an extremely readable introduction to a literature few comparatists know at first hand and as a demonstration that scholarly rigor and critical sophistication are attainable in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964), p. vii.