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## Introduction: 'Reading Texts'

Steven J. Mailloux

*Loyola Marymount University*, [steven.mailloux@lmu.edu](mailto:steven.mailloux@lmu.edu)

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# Introduction: "Reading-Texts"

What you're reading aloud is my publication,  
cribbing Fidentinus, but when you read it badly,  
it begins to be yours.

—MARTIAL, *Epigrammata*

Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what  
he himself has imported into them.

—NIETZSCHE, *The Will to Power*

Interest in reading and interpretation continues to grow among contemporary literary theorists. This volume of *Bucknell Review* is concerned with one particular form of that interest: current theories of the reading process and reader-oriented criticism. Such reader-response approaches to literature have been proposed, discussed, and attacked during the last decade, but they have received much less publicity than the Continental-based criticisms (especially structuralism and deconstruction) that have gained the most notoriety as challengers to the critical orthodoxies in America. During the last four years, however, MLA annual conventions have scheduled several meetings on reader-centered criticism, including a forum on "The Reader in Literature" in 1976; and the English Institute included a series of papers on "Reading" in its 1976 sessions. Discussions of readers and reading have appeared in the pages of *PMLA*, *New Literary History*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Diacritics* in recent years; a newsletter called *Reader* began publication in 1977. 1980 will see the distribution of two important collections of reader-oriented criticism and theory: a retrospective gathering of the most significant published essays, edited by Jane Tompkins, and a collection of new articles, *The Reader in the Text*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman.<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons for this emergence of reader-response approaches on the critical scene. The decline in the vitality of Anglo-American New Criticism left a vacuum in American critical discourse that is being filled by domestic and Continental approaches such as phenomenology, semiotics,

deconstruction, feminist critiques, and revised versions of psychoanalytic and Marxist criticisms. Reader-response theory and practice borrow freely from these approaches, attempting to move critical attention away from the autonomous literary text to the interaction of the reader with that text. To accomplish this goal, reader-response criticism opens up the space for literary interpretations by emphasizing neglected elements within this space: thus it manipulates the various relations of text to reader within a framework of interaction that is sequential (Fish's "structure of response," Iser's "anticipation and retrospection") and holistic (Culler's "naturalization," Iser's "consistency-building," Holland's "characteristic transformation" toward a "meaningful unity").<sup>2</sup> The practical criticism produced by this manipulation has resulted in such fresh and stimulating interpretations as those found in Stephen Booth's *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Fish's *Surprised by Sin*, and Iser's *The Implied Reader*.<sup>3</sup>

Reader-response critics are not only helping to displace New Critical practice, but also as literary theorists they are directly attacking its objectivist and formalist assumptions. Reader-oriented theory argues for the Affective Fallacy Fallacy, a rejection of the notion that the text should be interpreted independently of the reader's reaction to it.<sup>4</sup> However, there is little agreement among reader critics on how the reading experience should be described, how readers should be viewed, or how texts are constituted—as the various discussions in this issue of *Bucknell Review* illustrate. In fact, this disagreement has led at least one reader-response critic to make it the source and sometimes the subject of his later theorizing.<sup>5</sup>

The preoccupation with readers reading is not restricted to practical criticism and literary theory. Some reader-oriented approaches stimulate interest because of their potential usefulness in the classroom, where reader-response criticism becomes a student-centered pedagogy in which the study of a self-contained and isolated text is replaced by attention to individual response or communal literary competence. The subtitle of *Reader* reflects this pedagogical interest: "a newsletter of reader-oriented criticism and teaching." Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* and Bleich's *Subjective Criticism* both developed from classroom concerns and practices. In *Structuralist Poetics* Jonathan Culler uses his reader-oriented concept of literary competence as a rationale for the institutional teaching of

literature.<sup>6</sup> The present volume also illustrates reading theory's pedagogical relevance at the end of Vicki Mistacco's essay.

The essays gathered here, primarily theoretical in nature, provide a good cross section of contemporary reader-oriented approaches to literature. Several pieces analyze established theories of reading (Cain on Fish, Champagne on Barthes, Deutelbaum on Holland and Mauron, Bleich on Ingarden, Culler, and Iser). Others represent new developments in accounts of reading (Spolsky and Schaubert using Grice) or extensions of older theories (Rosenblatt on her "transactional criticism"). Waniek's essay locates parallels to reader-centered theories in the work of Gadamer in philosophy and Gombrich in art history. The final two essays illustrate the implications of reading theories for other domains: Iser for a theory of looking and Rabinowitz for a theory of listening. In "The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theater," Iser provides a spectator-centered approach to drama by developing the implications of the reading theory presented in his books *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading*. In "Fictional Music: Toward a Theory of Listening," Rabinowitz follows a similar strategy by expanding his concept of implied audiences (developed in "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences") to account for musical borrowings in a listener-centered theory of music. While these two final articles demonstrate the relevance of reading theories to visual and aural art forms, the rest of the essays in this volume testify to the continued vitality of contemporary discussions of readers and their readings of literary texts.

STEVEN MAILLOUX



#### NOTES

1. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane Tompkins (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). For a survey of reader-oriented criticism, see the introductions and bibliographies in these collections. Also see: David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), chapter 4; Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Introduction to Reception Aesthetics," *New German Critique*, No. 10 (Winter 1977): 29-63; Steven Mailloux, "Reader-Response Criticism?" *Genre* 10 (Fall 1977): 413-37 and "Learning to Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 12 (Spring 1979): 93-108; Peter Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Autumn 1977): 121-41; and Rien T. Segers,

"Readers, Text and Author: Some Implications of Rezeptionsästhetik," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 24 (1975): 15-23. This note and those which follow can serve as a selective bibliography to descriptions of the reading process in current literary theory.

2. Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," *New Literary History* 2 (Autumn 1970): 126-27, 139; Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3 (Winter 1972): 284-85; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 137-60; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 118-25; Norman Holland, *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 121-22, 126.

3. Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2d ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1971); Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969); and Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

4. See Fish, "Literature in the Reader," p. 139, and Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), pp. 44-45.

5. Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (Spring 1976): 477-85.

6. Culler, p. 121.