Introduction: 'Reading Texts"

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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 Grosman.1

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"). The practical criticism produced by this
manipulation has resulted in such fresh and stimulating in-
terpretations as those found in Stephen Booth's An Essay on
Shakespeare's Sonnets, Fish's Surprised by Sin, and Iser's The Implied
Reader.

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. 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
to at least one reader-response critic to make it the source and
sometimes the subject of his later theorizing.

The preoccupation with readers reading is not restricted to
practical criticism and literary theory. Some reader-oriented
approaches stimulate interest because of their potential useful-
ness 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

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 ac-
counts of reading (Spolsky and Schauber using Grice) or exten-
sions of older theories (Rosenblatt on her "transactional critic-
icism"). 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 impli-
cations 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 contem-
porary discussions of readers and their readings of literary texts.

Steven Mailoux

NOTES

1. Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, edited by Jane Tomp-
kins (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and The Reader in the Text:
Essays on Audience and Interpretation, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Grosman (Prince-
see the introductions and bibliographies in these collections. Also see: David Bleich, Sub-
jective Criticism (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), chapter 4; Peter Uwe Hobendahl,
Steven Mailoux, "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): 95-108; Peter Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexami-
nation 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.


6. Culler, p. 121.