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3 The Turns of Reader-Response Criticism

Steven Mailloux

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The essay that follows is an expansion and a deepening of the materials Professor Mailloux presented at the NCTE Summer Institute in 1987, where he accomplished a wonderfully lucid review of reader-response criticism in a three-hour morning lecture/workshop.

The goal of reader-response criticism is to talk more about readers than about authors and texts. During the last twenty years such talk has involved a diversity of tropes and arguments within the institutional activities of literary criticism, history, theory, and pedagogy. In this brief essay I analyze early forms of this diversity in the 1970s and suggest some new turns reader-response criticism has taken in the 1980s.

Rhetoric as trope (figurative language) and as argument (persuasion) provides the framework for my discussion of reader-oriented criticism. Rhetoric presents a useful conceptual bridge from the linguistic and philosophical topics of post-structuralism to the material and political concerns of cultural criticism. That is, the rhetorical tradition has returned again and again to the very questions that now preoccupy such discourses as deconstruction and ideology critique, having often focused on the former's questions about the grounds of knowledge.
claims and the role of tropes in the communication (or troubling) of
textual meaning, and the latter’s questions about the grounds of political
action and the role of persuasion in a text’s ideological effects. It is
precisely these rhetorical concerns with tropology and anti-foundation-
alism and with ideology and politics that seem lacking in most reader-
response criticism of the 1970s. Instead, the predominant rhetorical
focus of most reader criticism was the issue of how the literary text
did or did not directly affect its readers during or after the reading
process. In retrospect, this rhetorical focus appears to have accomplished
three things within academic literary study: it provided a decade of
intense arguments about a limited number of theoretical topics; it
extended without radically altering the practice of close reading within
literary criticism; and it presented a renewed institutional justification
for a student-centered pedagogy.

The Old Rhetoric of Reader Talk

The easiest way into reader-response criticism is to view it within the
rhetorical context of American literary criticism in the late 1960s. At
that time, despite various foreign and domestic challenges, New Critical
formalism continued to provide the most influential tropes for critical
practice and theory: the literary work was figured as an organic unity,
a well-wrought urn, or a verbal icon, and criticism was equated with
close reading or objective analysis of this artifact. In most versions of
New Critical formalism, such metaphors for literature and definitions
of criticism focused attention on the text in and of itself, emphasizing
the objective meaning contained in the work and rejecting as evidence
for correct interpretation historical background, the testimony of au-
thors, or any response statements by readers.

In fact, the discourses placed under the banner of “New Criticism”
differed in many important respects, but such diversity counted for
little within the rhetorical context of academic criticism in the late
sixties. Reader-response approaches, like other challenges to formalist
orthodoxy, treated New Criticism monolithically and picked out of its
theoretical manifestos a limited number of doctrines that it then used
strategically to position itself as a “new” approach to academic literary
study. Chief among these foregrounded doctrines was the New Critical
rejection of the “Affective Fallacy.”

In the opening sentences of their influential 1949 essay, Monroe
Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt summarized their formalist fears about
“obstacles to objective criticism” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954, p. 21).
First, there was the danger of the “Intentional Fallacy,” defined as “a confusion between the poem and its origins,” and then there was the “Affective Fallacy... a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does).” It was exactly this rhetorical topic—what a text does to a reader—that reader-response criticism came to take as central to its critical project. But, according to New Criticism, any approach that interpreted literature in terms of its effects on readers committed the Affective Fallacy, which inevitably led to critical “impressionism and relativism.” Indeed, Wimsatt and Beardsley claimed, the outcome of both fallacies is “that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.” These anxieties about disappearing texts and unconstrained interpretations were constitutive of the rhetorical context of literary theory when a new focus on readers reading began to be promoted in the late sixties.

The most vital theoretical phase of this reader-response criticism extended from about 1970 through 1980, from the initial impact of a new reader-oriented criticism through publication of the retrospective collection *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (1980b), edited by Jane Tompkins. The theoretical debates of this period were defined ahead of time by a rhetorical situation in which New Criticism, under attack for years, still defined the terms of theorizing about literature for most professors of English. And most telling for the arguments of reader-response theory was the New Critical designation of the Affective Fallacy as “a special case of epistemological skepticism” (Wimsatt and Beardsley, p. 21). As we will see, the most prominent reader-response critics of the 1970s felt it necessary to respond to the latter charge of relativism as they promoted specific kinds of reader talk in literary study.

But the rhetorical context of the early seventies was not constituted simply by what was explicitly foregrounded in theoretical debates. Equally important was what remained excluded and forgotten. Reader-response criticism of this early period acknowledged some precursors to its focus on readers reading, but it strangely overlooked one of the most influential reader critics of the previous thirty years: Louise Rosenblatt. It will be my speculative argument here that Rosenblatt’s work and its implicit neo-pragmatism had to be “forgotten” in order for the new reader-response criticism to establish its theoretical ethos and carry out a decade of intense theoretical debate over the question of its “epistemological skepticism.” Put most simply: Rosenblatt’s prior dismantling of the reader/text distinction had to be ignored in order for a certain kind of theoretical work to be done, and that theoretical
work needed to be done, it was thought, in order to provide a foundation for reader talk in criticism and pedagogy.

*Literature as Exploration* first appeared in 1938. Thirty years later, immediately before the rise of a new reader-oriented criticism, Rosenblatt published a revised version, in which she explicitly adopted the transactional vocabulary of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley's *Knowing and the Known* (1949). In a footnote citing this pragmatist text, Rosenblatt explains that "The usual terminology—e.g., 'the reaction of the reader to the literary work,' 'the interaction between the reader and the work,' or references to 'the poem itself'—tends to obscure the view of the literary experience presented here. . . . In various disciplines transaction is replacing interaction, which suggests the impact of distinct and fixed entities. Transaction is used above in the way that one might refer to the interrelationship between the knower and what is known. The poem is the transaction that goes on between reader and text" (Rosenblatt 1968, p. 27n). Here Rosenblatt allies her reading theory with the pragmatist rejection of traditional epistemology and the separation of the knower from the known, the subject from the object. Figuring the poem as a transactive event, Rosenblatt sets aside beforehand the very question that fueled the next decade of reader-response critical theory: is it the reader or the text that determines interpretation?

This question assumes that the reader and the text are "distinct and fixed entities" and that the job of reader-response theory is to figure out which is in control. To ask this question is to accept Wimsatt and Beardsley's foundationalist concern over "epistemological skepticism." It is precisely such foundationalism that pragmatism refuses to take seriously. More exactly, pragmatism denies the subject-object split and rejects the notion that there needs to be a theory of knowledge that regulates the relationship between a knower and an object known. In explaining their transactional framework, Dewey and Bentley define "self-action" as the view that things act under their own powers, and "inter-action" as the view that "thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection." They then replace both views with a notion of *trans-action*, "where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'" (1949, p. 108). In another place the authors define transaction as the "knowing-known taken as one process in cases in which in older discussions the knowings and knowns are separated and viewed as in interaction" (p. 304).
In an appendix to *Knower and the Known*, Dewey observes that separating the subject and the object has led to a long tradition of epistemological controversy over the relation of the knower to the known, a controversy in which "the problem of problems was to determine some method of harmonizing the status of one with the status of the other with respect to the possibility and nature of knowledge." Dewey suggests that the debate has reached a deadend: "It is... as if it had been discovered that the competing theories of the various kinds of realism, idealism, and dualism had finally so covered the ground that nothing more could be found to say" (p. 322). Dewey and Bentley tried to displace such foundationalist theorizing with their transactional argument for not separating subject and object, and Bentley observed with pleasure in a 20 April 1950 letter to Dewey that Rosenblatt was "all excited about applications of *Knowing and the Known* to literature" (see Rosenblatt 1978, p. xiv). But such anti-foundationalist theorizing certainly didn’t convince everybody. Wimsatt and Beardsley published "The Affective Fallacy"—with its foundationalist worry over "epistemological skepticism"—in the same year as *Knowing and the Known*, and twenty years later reader-response theorists were to spend a decade arguing over the same problem. All these new theorists seemed oblivious to Rosenblatt’s neo-pragmatist attempt to dissolve the problem by refusing to separate the reader and the text.

**A Review of Reader-Response Criticism**

The canon of reader-response criticism was established by a series of retrospective collections, overviews, and reading lists of the early 1980s. The texts most often included in this canon were authored by David Bleich, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Jonathan Culler. As we will see, these five critics varied widely in their different theoretical assumptions, critical strategies, and pedagogical practices: but because in varying degrees they all explicitly rejected New Critical formalism, they were grouped together under the rubric of "reader-response criticism." This naming process is, in fact, a very important aspect of how institutional practices get modified within academic literary studies. As with the label "New Criticism" decades earlier, "reader-response criticism" covered over many differences among critics but gave a certain kind of institutional leverage and rhetorical power to an array of new theories and methods. During the seventies it was more important that reader-response critics rejected the "Affective Fallacy" than it was that they did so in sometimes contradictory ways.
In an overview (Interpretive Conventions) published in 1982, I presented a chart that attempted to map out the similarities and differences among the most important reader-response critics. A version of this chart (Fig. 1) is still useful, I believe, not only for its intended purposes but because it stands as an emblem for the exclusions alluded to above: tropology, anti-foundationalism, ideology, politics, and Rosenblatt’s transactional theory. Each of these exclusions enables a certain kind of theorizing to continue, a kind quite important to the reader talk of the seventies. In my reuse of the chart here I mention in passing how each of these exclusions functioned to enable the rhetoric of reader-response theory and practice. In what follows I will not do full justice to the complexity and sophistication of these reader-response critics, and I will only gesture toward how some of them have revised their approaches in the 1980s. My main goal is simply to provide an introduction to reader-response criticism by describing in schematic form the rhetorical context of reader talk in recent literary studies.

Subjectivism

We can begin with David Bleich’s subjective criticism. In books such as Readings and Feelings (1975) and Subjective Criticism (1978), Bleich insisted that teachers and critics should start their talk about literature with the individual reader’s response. He argued again and again that the literary text exerts no constraints on the individual reader and that there is no such thing as an objectively correct interpretation. The worst fears of the New Critics were realized in Bleich’s theorizing: “The poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear” (Wimsatt 1954, p. 21). Bleich rejected the formalist worry over impressionism and relativism by embracing with glee these dual dangers of the Affective Fallacy. However, despite this radical rejection of formalism, Bleich still accepted the foundationalist alternatives of New Criticism: his subjectivism simply reversed its objectivism. Rather than displacing the reader/text framework entirely, as Rosenblatt often did, Bleich made one of its poles—the reader—completely dominant, mirroring in his theorizing the New Critical move to give complete dominance to the opposite pole—the text.

Bleich’s early theory of reading elaborates a three-step process. First you have the original individual reading experience, which he calls “symbolization.” Then there’s the reader’s attempt to articulate that reading experience in the act of “resymbolization.” In the classroom situation, this resymbolization involves the writing of response statements by individual student-readers. It is this aspect of Bleich’s theory
### PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL

- **David Bleich's** subjective criticism
- **Norman Holland's** transactive criticism
- Primacy of subjectivity
- Transaction between reader and text within reader's identity theme

### INTERSUBJECTIVE MODEL

- **Wolfgang Iser's** phenomenological criticism
- Interaction between reader and text
- Text's manipulation of reader

### SOCIAL MODEL

- **Stanley Fish's** affective stylistics
- **Jonathan Culler's** structuralist poetics
- Reading conventions
- Authority of interpretive communities

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Figure 1. Similar in some ways, different in others, the theorizing of reader-response critics in the seventies enabled the rhetoric of reader-response theory and practice. (Reprinted from Steven Mailloux: *Interpretive Conventions*. Copyright © 1982 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.)
that has been most influential. Literature teachers at many levels have cited Bleich's work as a justification for less authoritarian, more student-centered pedagogy.

The third and final stage in Bleich's model is the sharing of individual response statements in a process he calls "negotiation." I have previously questioned this move from symbolization to negotiation because I found it difficult to understand how radically subjective responses could be in any sense rhetorically "negotiated" (Mailloux 1982, pp. 32-37). If a process of negotiation means some kind of interpretive give-and-take, on what shared basis would such a process take place if there were nothing but individual responses to apply to as a basis for judgment? If in a particular rhetorical context no hierarchies of criteria or shared interpretive conventions for valid readings were even temporarily in place, how could a negotiation (a give-and-take rather than a show-and-tell) ever come about? Furthermore, wouldn't the radical subjectivism of the theory imply that for every response statement to be negotiated there would be as many different subjective responses to that document as to the original literary text? I am now less concerned with these theoretical contradictions than with the pedagogical consequences of Bleich's theory. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s his work was adapted and used to empower many teachers in their revisions of traditional classroom practices.

On my chart, I grouped Bleich's subjective criticism with the theory of another psychological critic, Norman Holland. The rhetoric of Holland's transactive criticism develops out of the arguments of ego-psychology combined with at least one significant trope from New Critical formalism. Rather than the text determining interpretation, Holland sees the reader's "identity theme" producing a text's meaning. Thus, disagreements over a text's interpretation derive from readers' different identity themes employed in reading. Identity themes are, in turn, located by reading a certain unity into the varied acts and attributes of a person. In fact, Holland draws an explicit parallel between his troping of the reader as a unity and formalism's troping of the text: "Identity is the unity I find in a self if I look at it as though it were a text" (Holland 1975c, p. 815). For Holland the identity of a reader is unique to that reader, just as for a New Critic the unity of a poem was unique to that poem.

Armed with this assumption, Holland's transactive criticism has always done a good job explaining differences in interpretations: different identity themes lead to the construction of different meanings (see, for example, 5 Readers Reading). But, as with Bleich's subjectivist theory, interpretive agreement has always presented Holland's trans-
active criticism with a problem. Once you build radical difference into your reading theory at its foundations, it is extremely difficult to arrive at a persuasive account of shared meanings and interpretive agreements. Bleich's and Holland's psychological reader-response criticism has had a very uneven effect on the discipline of literary studies. In each of the activities of theory, criticism, and pedagogy, their psychological models have exerted different levels of rhetorical influence. Quite understandably, in the discourse of literary criticism, they have found few imitators. In "Hamlet—My Greatest Creation," Holland (1975b) describes the way his identity theme transacted Shakespeare's text as his own. This is an entertaining performance but one that few others could or would want to bring off. New Critical admonitions against impressionism and relativism remain very powerful, and traditional and avant-garde critics continue to resist letting the text disappear entirely as they rely upon many formalist assumptions about what counts as a convincing interpretation in today's rhetorical context. In discourses of contemporary theory the situation is slightly different. Psychological reader-response theory has persuaded many to take its work seriously, especially groups of theorists devoted to exploring the problems of reading and interpretation. However, it has had much less influence than one might have thought, probably because its assumption of a unified reader with self-presence contradicts widely influential post-structuralist assumptions about a decentered self and rejections of the myth of presence. It is not that every literary theorist now agrees with Lacanian psychoanalysis or Derridean deconstruction; it is simply that critiques of the unified self have a particularly strong rhetorical purchase at the present moment, and psychological reader-response criticism does not appear to respond forcefully to this critique of its most basic assumptions and enabling metaphors. Finally, Holland and especially Bleich have achieved a significant effect in the area of pedagogy. Whatever one might say about their theories and critical projects, psychological reader-response critics have provided influential arguments for teachers at all levels who are attempting to move their classroom practices toward more student-centered methods and goals. In this way, Bleich and Holland are continuing the pedagogical emphasis that has always distinguished the work of Louise Rosenblatt. Such classroom effectiveness remains an important accomplishment for any literary theorist.

The Intersubjective Model

More influential than psychological reader-response theorists are reader critics who base their work on an intersubjective model of reading. On
my chart (see Fig. 1) I grouped the early work of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish in this category of reader talk. Iser borrows from Ingarden's phenomenology and Gadamer's hermeneutics to propose a theory of reading that attempts to avoid the extremes of readerly subjectivity and textual objectivity. He often figures the reader as a creative gap-filler. The reader fills textual gaps of various kinds: for example, the facial features left out of a character description, or a moral judgment implied but not explicitly stated after a particular juxtaposition of plot events. The presence of these gaps in the text requires that the reader be active, not passive, during the temporal reading process. As Iser (1974) puts it, "the unwritten aspects" of fictional scenes

not only draw the reader into the action but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situations, so that these take on a reality of their own. But as the reader's imagination animates these 'outlines,' they in turn will influence the effect of the written part of the text. (p. 276)


In describing this reading process, Iser often sounds much like Rosenblatt:

The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (1974, p. 275)

However, Iser's theory soon turns away from claims like those of Rosenblatt's neo-pragmatism, and instead of talking about the transaction between entities that are not distinct and fixed, he talks in great detail about "the interaction between text and reader" (1974, p. 276, my emphasis). The features of the text are pre-given, and it is those pre-given features that constrain the reader's creative activity. Thus, instead of setting aside the problems of foundationalist theories of correct interpretation, he takes up their claims and skillfully crafts a theory that avoids the charges of "impressionism and relativism" and justifies the large amount of reader talk in his critical interpretations.

Particularly telling is Iser's theoretical attempt to negotiate his way around Wimsatt and Beardsley's criticism of the Affective Fallacy. He basically accepts their point that a focus on the results of the work is not the job of the literary critic or theorist. "Where their criticism is justified is in the fact that they regard the disappearance of the work
in its result as a problem—in this case—of psychology and not of aesthetics.” Iser argues that granting this formalist point does not mean a prohibition on talk about the reader. He claims that his theory of reading does not focus on results but on how those results are at least potentially prestructured by the literary text itself. “It follows that the reproach of the ‘Affective Fallacy’ cannot be applied to a theory of aesthetic response because such a theory is concerned with the structure of the ‘performance’ which precedes the effect” (1978, pp. 26-27). Not only does Iser assume fixed entities that interact; he also provides a detailed description of the textual structures that guide the reader’s performance. Here the neo-pragmatism seen in Rosenblatt’s work is left far behind indeed.

Whatever its theoretical underpinnings, Iser’s readerly interpretations of fiction exerted a strong influence on many critics. Jane Tompkins (1980a) and others have pointed out a significant institutional reason for this influence and the similar persuasive force of Fish’s early “affective stylistics.” Unlike the reader talk of Bleich and Holland, that of Iser and Fish enabled the continuation of the formalist practice of close reading. Through a vocabulary focused on a text’s manipulation of readers, Fish was especially effective in extending and diversifying the formalist practices that continued business as usual within literary criticism. In his detailed interpretations, he constructed intricate narratives of how a text guides its reader step-by-step through the syntax of sentences and the turns of longer passages. He described how a text’s rhetoric creates a temporal pattern of responses with puzzles, revelations, corrections, lessons, surprises, and a wealth of other effects often passed over by critical perspectives focusing on holistic meanings.

What such reader-response criticism claims to make visible is the temporal reading process, in which meaning is the product of the interaction of reader and text. What becomes invisible in many such readings is the sociopolitical context constituting the reception of a text at particular historical moments. This form of reader criticism often assumed an ideal reader unencumbered by particular characteristics of class, occupation, race, nationality, gender, and age. When the question was asked, “Whose reading experience does affective stylistics describe?” The answer came back, “That of the informed reader.” Such a response could have opened up reader-response criticism to an array of questions about the reading subject: how was what counted as “informed” for a particular text determined by sociopolitical coordinates? How were readers positioned by the ideologies of their historical moments in reading a literary work?
Structuralism and the Social Model

Such questions as the above were usually ignored by reader-response critics in the seventies. Instead, questions about the informed or ideal reader were answered by exclusively literary answers. The most powerful version of this response came from Jonathan Culler, who challenged Fish to provide a full-blown description of the informed reader. In his 1970 essay, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," Fish had explained that the informed reader was the person with the linguistic and literary competencies assumed by the text (1980b, p. 48). Culler called Fish to account for not describing in detail the reader's literary competence (1981, p. 125). In Structuralist Poetics (1975) Culler himself attempted to use recent semiotic and structuralist theory to elaborate such an account of reading conventions for the lyric poem and the novel. According to Culler, reading conventions are the shared strategies used for making sense of literary texts, strategies such as viewing a text in a specific genre, organizing meaning around a central theme, and relating metaphors to each other. The set of reading conventions that enabled the understanding of poems and novels constituted what Culler called "literary competence." Though not exclusively so, Culler's readerly project focused on conventions of intelligibility for making sense of literary texts. He tended to treat literary competence somewhat monolithically, pushing to the background the political stakes of competing literary competencies. He did not emphasize how the literary competence he described was embedded within larger social formations and traversed by political ideologies extending beyond the academy. Moreover, Culler did not question the whole linguistic project of formally describing what he posited as an integrated, coherent system of conventions.

At least one of the reasons for backgrounding these issues is once again the old foundationalist fear of epistemological skepticism. In Structuralist Poetics Culler was especially interested in describing how his view of reading conventions did not lead to extreme relativism or interpretive freeplay. He argued against certain versions of post-structuralism, claiming that in opening up interpretation to the play of signification, some post-structuralists depend on but refuse to acknowledge the shared conventions of reading. Culler suggested that such post-structuralist projects collapse two very different semiological activities: descriptions of the "implicit rules which enable readers to make sense of texts" and attempts "to change those rules" (p. 249). Failing to recognize this distinction, some post-structuralists appear to think
that they can change ways of reading all at once without relying on
conventions already in place. "But by the very nature of things they
can proceed only step-by-step, relying on the procedures which readers
actually use, frustrating some of these so that some new ways of
producing meaning are developed, and only then dispensing with
others" (p. 253).

Culler noted that one of the goals of such a reading revolution is to
set free the "text of infinite possibilities," the "geno-text" with its hidden
traces of all past, present, and future meanings. When a post-structuralist
emphasizes that texts are open to this unending play of signification,
Culler claimed, they create a problem for the activity of criticism: if
no reading conventions are recognized as limiting the play of meanings,
then there "is no standpoint from which a proposal could be rejected"
(p. 247). And since post-structuralists "would not want to claim that
their analyses are no better than any other" (p. 252), they must reject
their own calls for interpretive freeplay and accept the fact that they
must work within the present conventions even as they attempt to
change them.

This argument near the end of Structuralist Poetics points in two
directions at once: backwards to formalist worries about relativism and
epistemological skepticism and forward to a rhetorical understanding
of interpretation. In the former turn, Culler seems to be at one with
Fish's early claims about the "objectivity" of reader talk. Reader-
response criticism is more objective than New Criticism because reader-
oriented theory and practice include what is truly objective about "the
activity of reading" and focus attention on "the meaning experience"
and "the active and activating consciousness of the reader" (Fish 1980b,
p. 44). Reader-response criticism describes this reading process, and its
theory guarantees that the reading described is the correct one. Its
theory claims to provide constraints on what counts as a correct
reading—thus avoiding relativism—by positing an informed reader
with literary competence. Culler in turn takes this competence as the
object of his theory and in one place justifies his enterprise by arguing
that if such competence did not exist, then literature professors would
have no justification for their teaching:

The time and effort devoted to literary education by generations
of students and teachers creates a strong presumption that there
is something to be learned, and teachers do not hesitate to judge
their pupil's progress towards a general literary competence. (1975,
p. 121)

But the content of a "general literary competence" is often exactly
what is at stake among competing perspectives in literary theory and
criticism. Is what counts as a valid interpretation for a 'ungian usually acceptable to most traditional or postmodern Marxists? Still, there is another way to turn Culler's preoccupation with reading conventions. Often in *Structuralist Poetics* Culler's reader talk is as much about readers' talking as it is about readers' reading. That is, reading conventions are often described as the available rhetorical moves that interpreters use in convincing someone else to accept their interpretations. In this sense, "literary competence" points not only to accepted practices of understanding texts but to "certain standards of argument and plausibility" in debates about textual meaning (1975, p. 253). "Indeed, the possibility of critical argument depends on shared notions of the acceptable and the unacceptable, a common ground which is nothing other than the procedures of reading" (p. 124). Here "reading" refers not just to a relation between a reader and a text but to the discussion of texts among interpreters.

**New Reader Talk about Rhetoric**

In the 1980s reader-response critics addressed many of the issues I have raised. For example, in *The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations* (1988), David Bleich raises political questions about reading and gender and provides a wide-ranging discussion of literacy and intersubjectivity. In *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982), Jonathan Culler gives up his project of describing a monolithic set of reading conventions and analyzes the rhetorical reading of textual tropes by deconstruction. In *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980a), Stanley Fish rejects the objectivist claims of affective stylistics and takes an explicit turn toward a hermeneutic theory of rhetoric as persuasion, a turn more fully developed in the anti-foundationalist arguments of *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (1989). And Louise Rosenblatt's transactional approach finally seems to be getting the attention in literary theory circles that it has long had among compositionists, educational reading theorists, and teachers of teachers. Rosenblatt's own assessment of the changed rhetorical context can be found in her preface to the fourth edition of *Literature as Exploration* (1983), in which she notes that the book "is being cited as the first empirically based theoretical statement of the importance of the reader's contribution" (p. xiv). The publication of Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* in the late seventies gave additional impetus in the eighties to theoretical reconsideration of her
transactional approach to the literary work. In that book Rosenblatt provides a more systematic presentation of her theory, distinguishing between aesthetic and nonaesthetic reading activities and entering into current debates over interpretation and evaluation.

If the new turns of reader-response criticism do not actually signal the end of a kind of reader talk that is distinguishable from other kinds of theories, they certainly do point to a new stage in the critical conversation. One way of characterizing this stage is to see reader talk as participating in the widely acknowledged return of rhetoric. To say that, however, is to say very little. The real question is "How does rhetoric return in the latest phase of reader-response criticism?" I will conclude with a couple of answers to this question, answers that develop out of the rhetorical tradition of reader-oriented criticism and theory.

A turn to rhetoric can be seen as the culmination of two related but separate trajectories of early reader-response criticism. In certain versions of such theories, the preoccupation with establishing the objectivity or, conversely, the subjectivity of reader-response criticism has given way to a questioning of the importance of the New Critical anxiety over epistemological skepticism. Paralleling the neo-pragmatist critique of foundationalism in philosophy, such a post-structuralist questioning of grounds among reader-oriented theorists has led to what I have elsewhere called a rhetorical hermeneutics, an attempt to put aside the foundationalist question "Is it the reader or the text that determines interpretation?" (see Mailloux 1989, ch. 1). A rhetorical hermeneutics tries to change the subject of interpretive theory from talk about readers approximating texts to talk about interpreters arguing over meanings. Such a change of subject entails a re-understanding of sophistic rhetoric, not as the embodiment of relativism and subjectivism, but as the tradition of critiques of foundationalist philosophy. A rhetorical hermeneutics joins neo-pragmatism in collapsing the reader-text distinction in that it claims there is no way of theoretically describing the correct reader-text relation in general. From this point of view, a rhetorical hermeneutics is always therapeutic, attempting to avoid the problems of foundationalist theories that claim to regulate interpretation outside the agonistic context of rhetorical assertion and challenge.

But the more positive aspect of rhetorical hermeneutics involves turning therapeutic theory into rhetorical history. Such histories construct narrative and analytical accounts of culturally situated acts of interpretation. Instead of claiming to specify how reading and interpretation work in general, rhetorical hermeneutics turns to how specific interpretive practices function within sociopolitical contexts of persuasion. These contexts involve tropes and arguments within the cultural
conversation at specific historical moments. To do such rhetorical histories means to provide a fine-grained description of a particular interpretive act in a particular institutional setting, within a particular cultural politics, involving agents and audiences traversed by ideologies of a particular social formation. To be concerned with such questions as a hermeneutic theorist means to become a practitioner of reception aesthetics and cultural critique. In this review, then, the next turn of contemporary reader-response criticism is toward neo-pragmatism and histories of cultural reception. The rhetoric of reader talk finally turns into talk about readers as rhetors.

References


