Readers & Reading

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General Editors' Preface

The outlines of contemporary critical theory are now often taught as a standard feature of a degree in literary studies. The development of particular theories has seen a thorough transformation of literary criticism. For example, Marxist and Foucauldian theories have revolutionised Shakespeare studies, and 'deconstruction' has led to a complete reassessment of Romantic poetry. Feminist criticism has left scarcely any period of literature unaffected by its searching critiques. Teachers of literary studies can no longer fall back on a standardised, received, methodology.

Lecturers and teachers are now urgently looking for guidance in a rapidly changing critical environment. They need help in understanding the latest revisions in literary theory, and especially in grasping the practical effects of the new theories in the form of theoretically sensitised new readings. A number of volumes in the series anthologise important essays on particular theories. However, in order to grasp the full implications and possible uses of particular theories it is essential to see them put to work. This series provides substantial volumes of new readings, presented in an accessible form and with a significant amount of editorial guidance.

Each volume includes a substantial introduction which explores the theoretical issues and conflicts embodied in the essays selected and locates areas of disagreement between positions. The pluralism of theories has to be put on the agenda of literary studies. We can no longer pretend that we all tacitly accept the same practices in literary studies. Neither is a *laissez-faire* attitude any longer tenable. Literature departments need to go beyond the mere toleration of theoretical differences: it is not enough merely to agree to differ; they need actually to 'stage' the differences openly. The volumes in this series all attempt to dramatise the differences, not necessarily with a view to resolving them but in order to foreground the choices presented by different theories or to argue for a particular route through the impasses the differences present.

The theory 'revolution' has had real effects. It has loosened the grip of traditional empiricist and romantic assumptions about language and literature. It is not always clear what is being proposed as the new agenda for literature studies, and indeed the very notion of 'literature' is questioned by the post-structuralist strain in theory. However, the uncertainties and obscurities of contemporary theories appear much less worrying when we see what the best critics have been able to do with

them in practice. This series aims to disseminate the best of recent criticism and to show that it is possible to re-read the canonical texts of literature in new and challenging ways.

RAMAN SELDEN AND STAN SMITH

The Publishers and fellow Series Editor regret to record that Raman Selden died after a short illness in May 1991 at the age of fifty-three. Ray Selden was a fine scholar and a lovely man. All those he has worked with will remember him with much affection and respect.

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Critical Inquiry, **16** (1990): 794–806; Yale French Studies for an extract from the essay 'The Resistance to Theory' by Paul de Man from *Yale French Studies*, **63** (1982).

Introduction

> The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at the wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame?[1]

The reader has been the object of a long and distinguished history of abuse. From Laurence Sterne's provocative teasing of readers in *Tristram Shandy*, through Baudelaire's and then T. S. Eliot's 'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!' ('You! hypocrite reader! – my double – my brother'), to, more recently, the postmodern antagonisms of John Barth's 'Life-Story', this is a tradition of what might be called the 'mocked reader'. Thus Barth's address characterizes the reader in terms of shame and desire, collusion and voyeurism, illegitimacy and suspect motivation, violence and abjection, monstrosity and insatiable lust. The joke is, of course, that no reader will identify with this 'reader', with 'you': the reader is uninsultable, not you. Who, then, is the reader? Where is she? And what is she doing?

Who reads? What is reading?

'The illusion is endlessly reborn', comments Paul Ricoeur, 'that the text is a structure in itself and for itself and that reading happens to the text as some extrinsic and contingent event.'[2] Much of the work in criticism and theory in recent years has been concerned to question the seductions of this endless illusion. Indeed, it has become clear that the double question 'who reads?' and 'what is reading?' is fundamental to many different aspects of criticism and theory. In the work of such critics as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Michael Riffaterre, Jonathan Culler,

Steven Mailloux, Judith Fetterley, Mary Jacobus and Paul de Man, there has been an explicit concentration on readers and reading. More generally, however, no aspect of literary criticism has remained immune to reading theory.

The two questions which this collection asks – Who reads? What is reading? – may be subdivided into a number of discrete problems: what do readers do when they read? Is reading determined by the text, by the reader's subjective responses, by social, cultural and economic factors, by conventions of reading, or by a combination of these? Is there such a thing as a true or correct reading? And if so, can we determine which reading is right? How do texts affect readers? Is there an ethics of reading? How might we describe the identity of the reader? Does such an identity change in reading or after reading? How is reading gendered? What would constitute a history of reading? What is the significance of rereading? And of misreading? This collection presents some of the ways in which recent reading theory has engaged with such questions.

The question of the identity of the reader has been answered in a confusingly large number of different ways. But this abundance of identities may itself suggest something about readers and reading: as Wai-Chee Dimock comments in an essay reprinted below, rather than a 'unified entity', the reader should be understood as a figure who is 'traversed by time and dispersed in time, making its staggered appearances in a variety of stages, in its residual, established, and emergent forms, and through its inflections by class, gender, and race'.[3] The fact that the question 'Who reads?' has been answered in so many ways, then, may be indicative of the instability or mobility of what we call 'the reader'. Before going on to consider the consequences of such variety it might be useful briefly to list a few examples of the ways that critics have described readers in recent theory:

- the reader is a hypothetical construct with all possible knowledge and interpretive skills at his or her disposal (Riffaterre);
- the reader is an individual subject and reading is determined by his or her 'identity theme' (Holland);
- the reader is not an individual but a community of readers functioning through the reading strategies employed by a particular member of that community (Fish);
- the reader is a series of moves or responses more or less predetermined by the language of the text itself but 'concretized' in the act of reading (Iser);
- the reader is an individual in a particular historical and social situation whose responses are available to empirical investigation through written records (Chartier);

- the reader is a woman, a gay man, the member of an ethnic minority or other marginalized person whose responses involve a certain resistance produced by ethnic, sexual or social difference (Fetterley).

Together with various other descriptions, these have all been offered as models of 'the reader' or have been emphasized as the focus of reading theory. Similarly, readers have been variously named by these and other critics: in *The Return of the Reader*, for example, Elizabeth Freund lists 'the mock reader (Gibson), the implied reader (Booth, Iser), the model reader (Eco), the super-reader (Riffaterre), the inscribed or encoded reader (Brooke-Rose), the narratee (Prince), the ideal reader (Culler), the literant (Holland), the actual reader (Jauss), the informed reader or the interpretive community (Fish)'[4] – and we might add the virtual reader and the real reader (Prince), the resisting reader (Fetterley), the actual, authorial and narrative audience (Rabinowitz), the embedded reader (Chambers), the Lacanian reader (Felman), the female reader (Schweickart, Flint), the gay or lesbian reader (Koestenbaum), and even the mind reader (Royle).

Reader-response criticism

The best-known and most influential attempts to describe readers and reading in recent years have gone under the general heading of 'reader-response criticism' or 'reader-oriented criticism', particularly associated with critics such as Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland and Michael Riffaterre. The high point of reader-response criticism may be said to have occurred around the year 1980, when two important collections of essays in reader-response criticism were published: Jane Tompkins's *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, a collection of representative essays from the 1970s and earlier, and Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman's *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, a collection of original essays. In the same year Stanley Fish published his influential book *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.

Various forms of reader-response criticism are explored in detail by Vincent B. Leitch in the second chapter of this collection: here, we shall simply indicate one or two general questions raised by such reading theory. The simplest way to approach reader-response criticism may be to think about the question of the *location* of textual meaning. The central question for reader-response criticism in this respect is: 'Who makes meaning?' or 'Where is meaning made?' As Stanley Fish asks, 'Is the

reader or the text the source of meaning?'[5] The different answers to this question may be reduced to three major variants which map the limits of reader-response criticism. Firstly, there are those critics, most influentially Norman Holland and David Bleich, who approach the problem from the perspective of American Ego Psychology. The focus for these critics is the particular response pattern of the individual reader, what Holland calls his or her 'identity theme'. Secondly, there are critics such as Michael Riffaterre whose work develops a structuralist approach to emphasize ways in which texts themselves direct, coerce or 'compel' reading: for Riffaterre, it is above all the text itself that controls the production of meaning. Finally, there are critics such as Wolfgang Iser, who attempt to negotiate between text and reader, to elaborate the interactive space of reading. Despite their other differences, reader-response critics do agree, however, that it is the task of reading theory to decide on the location of authority for interpretation.

This assumption has been questioned from a number of perspectives. Thus, for example, Stanley Fish himself has argued that reading theory should consider reading as an experience rather than simply in terms of the elucidation of textual meaning.[6] Deconstructive critics such as Paul de Man also argue against the kind of hermeneutic criticism proposed by reader-response critics, suggesting that such work attempts to 'do away with reading altogether' by making reading a 'means toward an end' – the end of 'a hermeneutically successful reading'.[7] In de Man's work, reading is itself the problem, not a means toward a solution. Finally, reader-response criticism has also come under attack from critics for whom any reader and any reading is necessarily positioned by particular social, political, historical and economic contexts: in the work of, for example, Schweickart and Koestenbaum, the tendency of reader-response criticism to describe a universal 'reader' is seen to ignore the differences of reading produced by women, gay or lesbian readers, or readers from ethnic minorities.

The present collection, then, demonstrates that during the 1980s and early 1990s reading theory has developed primarily in two directions. The first direction has been towards the recognition that readers are historically or socially constructed, rather than abstract and eternal essences. This has necessitated a recognition of the politics and history of reading: once it is established that readers are *different*, that no single identity can be demanded of or imposed on readers, then questions of social, economic, gender and ethnic differences become inescapable in reading theory. The second direction has involved a problematization of the very concept of 'reading' and 'the reader', a recognition not only that readers are different from one another, but that any individual reader is multiple, and that any reading is determined by difference.

The politics of reading

To talk about the politics of reading might appear to be a contradiction in terms. The conventional view is summarized by the psychologist Alan Kennedy: 'Reading is a solitary affair, involving one person and a book.'[8] Reading is widely represented in paintings, books, films, and so on, as embowered, secluded, abstracted. Reading, in the modern, post-enlightenment era, characteristically involves a dissolution of the world and of the reader's self into the book – as in Wallace Stevens's poem 'The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm': 'The reader became the book; and summer night/Was like the conscious being of the book.'[9] Reading is seen as an escape – a removal of the self from the world, or, as here, a dissolution of the borders of self, world and book. The reader is characteristically seen as isolated, and political questions – concerned with social relationships and intersubjective structures of power – are understood to be arbitrary interruptions of a private activity.

In recent years, however, the very privacy with which reading is often thought to begin has been described within a historical context as part of a specific discursive regime. Privacy has been redescribed as a historically specific result of a certain construction of personal identity (briefly, privacy depends on an enlightenment notion of the autonomous subject, which in turn is understood to be a product of liberal humanism or bourgeois individualism).[10] In this respect, reading as an isolated, silent activity can be put into historical context, and decisions about what to read, where to read, when to read, and how to read can be understood to be determined by social, religious or political restraints and codes.

A number of critics have recently begun to develop theories of the politics of reading. A brief account of the work of three of these critics, Steven Mailloux, Ross Chambers and Tony Bennett, will provide a sense of what might be involved in such a political rereading of reading. Steven Mailloux argues for a 'rhetorical hermeneutics' in which such 'foundational' theoretical problems as the identity of the reader, reading and meaning are suspended to make way for an analysis of the historical circumstances of particular acts of reading. Mailloux suggests that a pragmatist theory and practice of criticism would focus on the 'argumentative forces at work within the particular historical contexts in which interpretive knowledge emerges'. For Mailloux, the search for a general theory of reading or a final clarification of the relation between text and reader such as those proposed by reader-response critics are 'simply the wrong questions to ask'.[11]

In *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (1984) and, more recently, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (1991), Ross Chambers has developed a theory of oppositional

reading. Chambers argues that desire is fundamental to the act of reading and that reading necessarily involves a *change* in desire. 'Reading', Chambers suggests, 'is the name of the practice that has the power of producing shifts in desire.' The political dimension in such an alteration is indicated when Chambers argues that 'to change what people desire is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the way things are'.[12] Chambers develops his theory with the help of Michel de Certeau's concept of oppositionality – represented in the present collection by de Certeau's essay on reading – whereby the subordinate elements in a system 'appropriate' and disturb the dominant elements, producing an alteration in the system without challenging it as such (factory workers will appropriate or customize for their own use the materials, functions, or conditions of work in their environment; readers will appropriate the text for their own purposes). Developing such a model of appropriation, Chambers argues that both the identity of the reader and of the text are shifted by or in reading by what he calls the irony of a certain (mis-)reading.

Finally, Tony Bennett has developed the notion of the 'reading formation' in order to describe ways in which texts produce 'reading effects' within cultural, political and institutional contexts. Reading formations – the particular strategies of reading determined by a specific historical and political context – are constantly changing, rather than absolute or eternal, they are 'constantly *rewritten* into a variety of material, social, institutional, and ideological contexts': 'The Text', declares Bennett, 'has no meaning effects that can be constituted outside such reading relationships.'[13]

The most influential politics of reading to have emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, however, has been that produced by feminism. In work by Judith Fetterley, Elaine Showalter, Nina Baym, Annette Kolodny, Mary Jacobus and others, women readers or readers as women have become crucial for both feminism and reading theory. In her pioneering study of the position of women in the reading of nineteenth-century American fiction, for example, Judith Fetterley suggests that the female reader of classic American fiction is subject to a process of *immasculation* whereby she is taught 'perforce to identify as male', to read as a man, and to suffer 'the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self'.[14] Fetterley proposes a resisting (female) reader, who would attempt to 'disrupt the process of immasculation by exposing it to consciousness'.[15] Fetterley's work has been widely influential, and has been developed by various critics in the 1980s and 1990s. But it is also exemplary in the problems it raises concerning the identity of women readers or feminist reading: in a recent essay, Pamela Caughie has argued that the identity of the reader constitutes an important site of conflict in feminist reading theory. Caughie suggests that such work as

Fetterley's and that represented in Flynn and Schweickart's important collection from 1986, *Gender and Reading* (see, for example, Schweickart's essay below pp. 67–94), appear to agree on 'the *point* of reading literature' as 'self-definition or self-awareness', as a certain resistance to male hegemony, to 'androcentric' reading, through an assertion of female identity. By contrast, Caughie argues, the work of post-structuralist feminist critics such as Mary Jacobus, Naomi Schor and Barbara Johnson tends to question such an identity: for them, 'Reading as a woman . . . involves *constructing* a gender identity in relation to the text', rather than *'finding* oneself'.[16] Thus, while Judith Fetterley argues that, for women readers, reading women's writing can produce a 'knowledge of the self . . . putting us in contact with our real selves',[17] Caughie suggests that such a model of reading may simply invert the androcentric model of reading that Fetterley wishes to subvert. As Caughie explains, the point of 'reading as a woman' in the work of Jacobus, Schor and Johnson is 'to challenge masculine appeals to legitimate (textual) meanings and legitimate (sexual) identities . . . Not identity (sameness, symmetry) but difference (heterogeneity, ambiguity) is the goal of women's readings.'[18] Feminist reading theory, then – its conflicts as well as its resolutions – indicates the importance of attending to ways in which reading identities are constructed in a social and political context. This debate is exemplified in the essays by Schweickart, Jacobus and Dimock reprinted in the present collection.

Histories of reading

At first sight, like the 'politics' of reading, the notion of a social history of reading may seem to be paradoxical: how can there be a social history of an activity which is so intangible and elusive, a process enclosed within the uncertain space of consciousness? Nevertheless, in the last few years a number of critics and historians have begun to trace the historical determinants of reading. As the influential historian Robert Darnton remarks, it is a simple fact that 'Reading has a history. It was not always and everywhere the same.' By virtue of the fact that reading is an interpretive activity of which records remain, reading can be 'historicized', because, Darnton suggests, 'Interpretive schemes belong to cultural configurations, which have varied enormously over time.'[19] And in an essay which reviews recent developments in the field, Roger Chartier describes three 'macroscopic oppositions' governing such a study: in the first place, there is an opposition between reading aloud and silent reading; secondly, between reading in public and reading in solitude; and thirdly, between educated and 'popular' reading.[20]

A history of reading would need to take account of work in the histories of literacy, book production, printing and publishing, libraries, education, population, reviewing and even such factors as architecture and clothing.[21] Robert Darnton has described five possible paths that such a history might take: firstly, it is possible to study the 'ideals and assumptions underlying reading in the past' by examining such documents as eighteenth-century anti-novel tracts and texts on the 'art of reading', religious manuals of study and worship, advertisements and prospectuses for books, reports of censors, and so on.[22] Secondly, in order to study how 'ordinary readers' have gone about the business of reading, it is necessary to study the history of education and literacy. Thirdly, it is possible to study the records which certain individuals have left of their reading habits – diaries, autobiographies, notebooks, marginal notes and so on – and to reconstruct the processes and strategies of particular readers. Fourthly, Darnton suggests a collaboration between literary theory and the history of reading, pointing out that a text by a writer such as Ernest Hemingway makes very different demands of its readers than does one by, say, Jane Austen, and that reader-response criticism has already developed methodologies for discussing such differences but that these should be combined with more specifically historical research on how contemporary audiences did actually read and respond.[23] Finally, Darnton points to the fact that the physical appearances of books themselves are suggestive for a history of reading – factors such as binding, typographical design, layout, paragraphing, punctuation, and so on, hold clues to historical developments in reading.

With Cathy N. Davidson's books *Revolution and the Word* (1986) and *Reading in America* (1989), and with James L. Machor's recent collection of essays *Readers in History* (1993), critics of American literature have also begun to explore the possibilities for a historical analysis of reading. Davidson and Machor, in fact, represent two separate strands in recent studies of the history of readers and reading. On the one hand, influenced by the work of Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier (see Chartier's essay below, pp. 134–50), there are studies such as Cathy Davidson's analysis of readers of early American novels. On the other hand, more directly in a line from classic reader-response criticism, is the collection edited by James Machor. Machor himself remarks on the difference between the essays in his book and the work exemplified by Davidson and Darnton which, Machor suggests, fails to engage with questions of '*how* people read', with 'the process of response and the dynamics of audience engagement in earlier periods'. Machor summarizes the concerns of his collection of essays in two parts: '(1) the exploration of reading as a product of the relationship among particular interpretive strategies, epistemic frames, ideological imperatives, and

social orientations of readers as members of historically specific – and historiographically specified – interpretive communities; and (2) the analysis of the way literary texts construct the reader's role through strategies necessitated and even produced by particular historical conditions."[24] Disappointingly, however, once the contributors in Machor's collection get down to specific examples, rather than studying the wealth of potential materials listed in Darnton's five categories summarized above, they often confine themselves to reviews in literary or popular periodicals. Blurring the distinction between conventions of book-reviewing on the one hand and those of reading itself on the other, many of the essays overlook the fact that what they are discussing is a form of writing, one with its own specific ideological and historically determined constraints, presuppositions and conventions.

Another recent history of reading, which also engages with feminist criticism and questions of the 'woman reader', is Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (1993). Flint's book discusses the construction of the woman reader – what she calls the 'topos of the woman reader'[25] – in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses. By examining such texts as medical and psychological works, advice manuals, books and essays on education and articles in newspapers, magazines, journals, as well as letters, diaries, biographies, novels, poetry, paintings, photographs, and so on, Flint's book graphically indicates ways in which reading theories and practices were 'frequently used to uphold and reinforce dominant patriarchal structures'. As Flint comments, reading 'involves . . . a fulcrum: the meeting-place of discourses of subjectivity and socialization'.[26] Flint's wide-ranging survey of this field will no doubt be developed in the future through rereadings of literary and other texts, as well as by way of more rigorously theorized analysis of readers and reading – particularly women readers – in nineteenth-century discourse.

Stop making sense

For some theorists, attempts by reader-response criticism to 'locate' meaning on the one hand, and attempts to specify a politics or history of reading on the other, will necessarily elide a number of fundamental difficulties in any theory of reading. In this respect, the most sustained and influential elaboration of the problematics of reading in the early 1980s must be the work of Paul de Man. Briefly summarized, de Man is concerned to examine the moment in which a text presents readers with a choice between two interpretations, neither of which can be given priority: in each case there is a conflict between grammar and rhetoric,

between constative and performative usage, or between literal and figurative language. These conflicts produce what de Man terms the 'impossibility' of reading, an impossibility, unreadability, or undecidability entailed by 'a set of assertions that radically exclude each other', assertions which 'compel us to choose while destroying the foundations of any choice'.[27] For de Man, it is within the impossible space of such an aporia or contradiction that reading may be most fully explored and, indeed, constituted.

More generally, deconstruction has been concerned to emphasize ways in which conventional descriptions of reading appear to resist reading itself – ways in which such descriptions involve a 'systematic avoidance of the problem of reading'.[28] In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida points to a 'powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for . . . a signified', which results in what he terms '*transcendent* reading'.[29] In a recent interview, Derrida glosses the word 'transcendent' in this phrase as 'going beyond interest for the signifier, the form, the language . . . in the direction of the meaning or referent'. The work of de Man, Derrida and others is precisely an attempt to 'do a nontranscendent reading', to focus on the resistance of reading to itself.[30] In this respect, as de Man says, 'Reading has to begin in [an] unstable commixture of literalism and suspicion.'[31] It is not simply that 'transcendent' reading (reading 'for meaning') should be or can be excluded – as Derrida comments, 'a text cannot by itself avoid lending itself to a "transcendent" reading' – rather, such transcendence must be 'suspended'.[32] While 'absolute resistance' to a transcendent reading 'would purely and simply destroy the trace of the text', Derrida insists that 'without annulling either meaning or reference' a literary text 'does something with this resistance'.[33] And what it does, for Derrida, is called reading.

It might be useful to sketch briefly a number of problems – moments or sites of resistance in reading – implied in or produced by deconstruction. The following summary is an attempt to bring together ways in which the work of Derrida and others would question the possibility of a single, unified configuration of readers and reading.

(1) With respect to what Derrida refers to as 'that impulse of identification which is indispensable for reading',[34] reading is, above all, a question of impossible identity. Readers must both identify with the text and at the same time open a space of reading, distance themselves or differ in reading. 'If [reading] succeeds it fails', remarks Samuel Weber, 'betraying the text by excess of fidelity, as it were, usurping the latter's prerogatives, taking its place or presenting itself as the double of writing; but if it fails, this too would condemn it to the very difference it seeks to efface; reading would fall short of its goal, its telos, the re-presentation of the text itself'.[35]

(2) 'By definition the reader does not exist':[36] the reader is produced in reading. The reader, as Shoshana Felman puts it, is a 'reading effect'.[37] At the same time, however, the work does not exist before the reader, it is produced in reading. In this respect, the priority, the originary locus and even the temporal primacy of text and reader are uncertain.

(3) Reading appears to involve a conflict between the singular and the general. On the one hand, each reading is different, inaugural, originary. On the other hand, as Derek Attridge puts it, 'readability . . . however subject to change across the particular instances of reading and interpretation, implies a repetition, a law, an ideality of some type'.[38] As J. Hillis Miller comments, reading 'occurs in a certain spot to a certain person in a certain historical, personal, institutional and political situation, but it always exceeds what was predictable from those circumstances'.[39] Reading is both a repetition and an origin.

(4) Whose is any particular reading? Paul de Man points out that a reading is 'not "our" reading, since it uses only the linguistic elements provided by the text itself'.[40] On the other hand, it is the task of reading to introduce meanings which do not 'belong' to the text but are conditioned by a specific reading event.

(5) Elaborating a theory of reading based on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Shoshana Felman suggests, in an essay reprinted below (pp. 182–8), that 'analytic reading' is 'the reading of a difference that inhabits language, a kind of mapping in the subject's discourse of its points of disagreement with, or difference from, itself'.[41] If interpretation involves a displacement and an articulation of a text's differences from itself, then the possibility of defining the location and identity of reading is disturbed. How can we read that which is different from itself? How could we possibly be 'true' to a text or read it right?

(6) As Werner Hamacher comments, while the justification for reading would be that 'it can successfully restore the meaning inherent in the sign', at the same time, the 'fundamental contingency of the relation between sign and meaning condemns its efforts to failure'.[42] Language itself, it would seem, resists reading.

Such resistances to reading within reading put into question the possibility of reading as 'communication' and call for a reappraisal of conventional models such as those proposed by reader-response criticism. The demand inhabiting the deconstruction of reading, rather than 'make sense', is to stop making sense. The action by which communication is produced – reading – is necessarily inhabited by its other, by its own resistance. While in most forms of writing, writers and readers would seek to avoid the interruption, disturbance or dissolution of communication in reading, as Yves Bonnefoy argues in an essay reprinted below (pp. 224–35), it is precisely such a disruption of

'communication' which may be said to constitute the literariness of a literary text.[43] An alternative tradition of critical engagement with questions of readers and reading, then, understands communication to be just *one element* in literary reading. Writing in the 1950s, the French writer and critic Maurice Blanchot rejects the interpretive or communicative model of reading and questions the identity of the reader. In a two-part essay from *The Space of Literature*, 'Communication and the Work' (the first part of which is reprinted below, pp. 189–96), Blanchot comments that 'What most threatens reading . . . is the reader's reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads – a man who knows in general how to read'.[44] Concerned to elaborate the literariness of literary texts – the 'space' of literature – Blanchot rejects the conventional view of reading as an exchange between two pre-established, fixed identities, the reader and the text. Far from attempting to establish identities for readers or for reading, Blanchot sees such identifications as barriers to reading: 'What most threatens reading' is knowing how to read. Paradoxically, it seems, 'knowing' how to read is, precisely, *not* knowing how to read.

The trance of reading

'Reading', Derrida declares, 'is transformational'.[45] Reading may be understood in terms of what we might call the 'trance of reading' – 'trance' as in transition or transit, transference, transposition, translation, transformation, transgression and, finally, entrancement. In the trance of reading, the identity of the reading subject is itself unstable, yet to be determined or constituted in the 'experience' of reading. In its most extreme form, the trance of reading would involve forgetting one's surroundings, being 'lost in a book' – in what Blanchot calls the 'fascination' of reading and what Derrida refers to, in a portmanteau neologism, as *delireium*.[46] As William Ray comments, glossing Georges Poulet's theory of reading, 'For the reader thus absorbed, a trance-like state ensues, in which the active intending of a meaning effaces, rather than constitutes, personal identity.'[47]

In his lucid discussion of readers and reading in *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler points out that, by and large, reading theory, whether psychoanalytic, feminist, Iserian or Fishean, has appealed to the 'experience' of the reader. But as the notions of the trance, fascination, or delirium of reading would indicate, such 'experience' is by no means beyond question because 'it proves no easier to say what is in *the* reader's or *a* reader's experience than what is in the text: "experience" is

divided and deferred – already behind us as something to be recovered, yet still before us as something to be produced'.[48] In this sense, reading might be defined as an event which is *not yet* an experience. Similarly, in *Reading Woman*, Mary Jacobus argues that an 'appeal to "experience" . . . creates an illusory wholeness or identity, denying the internal division which simultaneously produces the gendered subject and the reading subject'.[49] Strangely, apparently paradoxically or 'counter-intuitively' (but intuition is also put in question by this reading of reading), reading is not, in any straightforward, unmediated sense, an experience.

This point may be demonstrated by a consideration of the temporality of reading. The classic questions of reader-response criticism –'who or what is reading?' – might be understood to disguise an even more fundamental problem: '*When* is reading?' This question is often answered by an appeal to a first reading as originary. By such an account, criticism is understood to be a distortion of the original experience of reading a text, an artificial, supplementary, or even parasitic defacement of reading. But there are a number of ways in which the time of such reading is disrupted. The time involved in reading any particular text varies from one reader to another and from one reading to the next. Indeed, the relation between the text and the experiential time of reading may be said to be constituted by a series of slippages. Even – or especially – in the most concentrated reading, the action of reading a text is subject to minute blockages, fits and starts, interruptions, speeding up and slowing down of the flow of the text. Furthermore, reading is constituted by movements forwards and backwards in the text, by the progressive and retroactive construction of meaning. Characteristically, reading a narrative involves an anticipation of future events (the end, the solution to the mystery, the consummation of love, the death of the protagonist, and so on), together with a retroactive reconstruction of prior events as reading proceeds.[50] The experience of reading a detective novel, for example, includes our knowledge of the solution to the mystery. But with this knowledge comes a fundamental alteration in our understanding and experience of the text up to the moment of revelation: with the revelation of the truth of the murder comes a reinterpretation of the whole text by which such experience is split in two, doubled or folded. To the extent that any narrative is determined by its own end, reading cannot take place until after it has finished.

The temporality of reading and the possibility of an originary, pure or unmediated experience of reading is further questioned by the notion of rereading. Rereading has itself recently become the subject for a richly provocative book by Matei Calinescu entitled *Rereading* (1993), as well as a chapter in Marcel Cornis-Pope's recent book *Hermeneutic Desire and*

Critical Rewriting (1992). Calinescu suggests that 'under certain circumstances the first reading of a work can in fact be a *double* reading' consisting of 'the sequential temporal movement of the reader's mind . . . along the horizontal or syntagmatic axis of the work' together with an attempt to '"construct" . . . the text under perusal, or to perceive it as a construction'.[51] As both Calinescu and Cornis-Pope note, forms of rereading have, in fact, been central to the work of certain theorists of reading. Michael Riffaterre, for example, develops a two-stage model – a first 'heuristic' linear reading and a second 'hermeneutic' or retroactive reading attending to the underlying 'matrix' or 'hypogram'.[52] Summarizing the various figurations of rereading in the work of, for example, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Vincent Leitch, Cornis-Pope has suggested that in each case, a 'first reading depends primarily on the expectation of pleasure (of a vicarious or hermeneutic kind)' while 'rereading draws on a critical (self)awareness'.[53] J. Hillis Miller even argues that reading, 'if it is really reading is always, even the first time, a matter of re-reading or re-vision' because such 'real' reading involves not only 'a knowledge of what the text says' but also 'of what the text represents or allegorizes'.[54] Rather differently, as Cornis-Pope points out, it would be possible to argue that an 'active feminist reading' (and, by extension, we might say, any oppositional reading, whether determined by class, gender or race, which reads against the hegemonic grain) is 'always *re-reading*' because of the way in which it is produced in opposition to – and therefore necessarily 'after' – that of phallogocentric readings.[55] In this respect, an originary or first reading would be an ideological construct concerned to confirm what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'.[56] Finally, Pierre Bourdieu has pointed to the way in which reading seems inevitably to slide into a theorization of reading, rereading as meta-reading, when he asks 'Can you read a text without wondering what reading is?'[57] Reading as rereading opens up a temporal space of reading, an irreducible difference in the time that we take to read.

The trance of reading, *delireium*, may also be understood in terms of the cognition of reading. What might it mean to 'understand' a text? Even in conventional discussions of reading, 'understanding' has a curious status. In *Critical Understanding*, Wayne Booth states that understanding 'is the goal, process and result whenever one mind succeeds in entering another mind or, what is the same thing, whenever one mind succeeds in incorporating any part of another mind'.[58] Not only would this description seem to involve a form of telepathic transference – one aspect of what we have termed the 'trance of reading' – but it also immediately suggests the problem of identity: the understanding mind is that which is, at least in part, other to itself. This is what William Ray calls the 'schizophrenic cognitive activity of the

reader', the way in which the mind's contents in reading are split or doubled, our thoughts not our thoughts.[59]

In this respect, reading involves a necessary otherness or alterity – as is suggested, in particular, in essays by Blanchot and de Certeau reprinted below. Paul Ricoeur makes this point in a recent interview: 'When a reader applies a text to himself, as is the case in literature, he recognizes himself in certain possibilities of existence – according to the model offered by a hero, or a character – but, at the same time, he is transformed; the becoming other in the act of reading is as important as is the recognition of self.'[60] Paradoxically, as we have seen, those critical discourses which attempt to reinscribe sexual and political difference in reading often rely for their work of political transformation on a coherent and stable identity for the reader. As Wayne Koestenbaum points out (below, pp. 166–81) in attempting to construct an identity for reading based, for example, on sexual orientation or race or gender, one risks 'submitting to a dangerously comfortable essentialism'.[61] The alternative tradition which 'begins' with Blanchot, attempts to hold in suspense the possibility of any such identity.[62] In reading, Poulet declares, I read 'the thoughts of another, and yet it is I who am their subject' – reading is 'a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them'.[63] We are possessed, inhabited by other thoughts and others' thoughts, words, language – reading ourselves not ourselves, reading not reading.

Notes

For their careful readings of and comments on earlier versions of this Introduction, I would like to thank Anna-Maria Hämäläinen-Bennett, James Giles, Nicholas Royle and Tiina Sarisalmi,.

1. JOHN BARTH, 'Life Story' from *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 123.
2. PAUL RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 164.
3. DIMOCK, 'Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader', p. 122.
4. ELIZABETH FREUND, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 7; for brief descriptions of these terms, see the 'Key Concepts' section below (pp. 236–41).
5. See *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 1.
6. See, for example, STANLEY FISH, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', in *Is There a Text in This Class*, pp. 21–67.

7. PAUL DE MAN, 'Introduction', in HANS ROBERT JAUSS, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. ix.
8. ALAN KENNEDY, *The Psychology of Reading* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 140.
9. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 358.
10. See PHILIPPE ARIÈS and GEORGES DUBY (eds), *A History of Private Life*, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987–91); on the privatization of reading in pre-revolutionary France and in Europe more generally, see ROGER CHARTIER, 'The Practical Impact of Writing', in Chartier (ed.), *Passions of the Renaissance*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), (vol. 3 in *A History of Private Life*); see also CHARTIER, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 219–25.
11. STEVEN MAILLOUX, 'Power, Rhetoric, and Theory: Reading American Texts', in Gerhard Hoffmann (ed.), *Making Sense: The Role of the Reader in Contemporary American Fiction* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1989), pp. 117, 118; and see his *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
12. ROSS CHAMBERS, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. xii; see also EDWARD W. SAID, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 66, on 'Contrapuntal reading' which would 'take account of both . . . imperialism and . . . resistance to it'.
13. TONY BENNETT, 'Text, Readers, Reading Formations', in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), pp. 218, 219.
14. JUDITH FETTERLEY *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. xii, xiii.
15. PATROCINIO SCHWEICKART, 'Reading Ourselves', p. 74, below.
16. PAMELA L. CALLHIE, 'Women Reading/Reading Women: A Review of Some Recent Books on Gender and Reading', *Papers on Language and Literature* **24** (1988): 322, 326 (my italics).
17. Quoted in ibid., p. 322.
18. Ibid., pp. 326–7. Compare SHOSHANA FELMAN's comment in *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), that 'The danger with becoming a "resisting reader" is that we end up, in effect, *resisting reading*' (p. 6).
19. DARNTON, 'First Steps Toward a History of Reading', in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 187.
20. ROGER CHARTIER, 'Frenchness in the History of the Book: From the History of Publishing to the History of Reading', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* **97**: 2 (1988): 322–4; on the development of silent, private reading as 'undeniably one of the major cultural developments' of the early modern period, see CHARTIER, 'The Practical Impact of Writing', p. 125.
21. On the relevance of the latter, see DARNTON, 'First Steps', pp. 167–8; see also ROGER CHARTIER, *The Cultural Uses of Print*, p. 221, and 'The Practical Impact of Writing', especially pp. 134–47.
22. DARNTON, 'First Steps', p. 171; for Darnton's five 'steps', see pp. 171–87. See PETER DE BOLLA, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and*

the Subject (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), Chapter 10, and FRIEDRICH A. KITTLER, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), for examples of the use of such materials.

23. See DAVIDSON 'Introduction: Toward a History of Texts', in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), for a similar argument for a cross-fertilization of historical research with reader-response criticism; see also JAUSS, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*.
24. JAMES L. MACHOR, 'Introduction: Readers/Texts/Contexts', in Machor (ed.), *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. x, xi.
25. FLINT, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. viii.
26. Ibid., pp. 10, 43.
27. DE MAN, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 245.
28. PAUL DE MAN, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 282.
29. JACQUES DERRIDA, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 49, 160.
30. JACQUES DERRIDA, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 44.
31. DE MAN, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 58.
32. DERRIDA, *Acts*, pp. 45, 48.
33. DERRIDA, *Acts*, p. 47. The work of Derrida generally may be understood as a meditation on – as well as a practice of – not least, reading. Despite the fact that to talk about the elaboration of a Derridean 'method' of reading would be an oxymoron, Derrida does, in a section of *Of Grammatology* entitled 'The Exorbitant Question of Method', present what he terms 'my principles of reading', which, it turns out, involves a 'justification . . . entirely negative' (*Of Grammatology*, p. 158).
34. Quoted in DEREK ATTRIDGE, 'Introduction' in *Acts*, p. 5.
35. SAMUEL WEBER, *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 92.
36. DERRIDA, *Acts*, p. 74.
37. SHOSHANA FELMAN, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 124.
38. ATTRIDGE, 'Introduction', p. 15; see also DERRIDA, *Acts*, pp. 69–70.
39. J. HILLIS MILLER, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 22.
40. DE MAN, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 17.
41. FELMAN, 'Renewing the Practice of Reading', pp. 184–5.
42. WERNER HAMACHER 'LECTIO: de Man's Imperative', in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (eds), *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 178.


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1 Interaction between Text and Reader*

WOLFGANG ISER

Wolfgang Iser's books *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading* (1978) were arguably the most influential works to emerge from classic reader-response criticism of the 1970s. In the following essay Iser gives a brief account of his phenomenological theory of the way in which reading is interactive, occurring *between* text and reader. For Iser, neither the study of texts nor the study of readers in isolation is likely to produce an adequate account of the literary work. Instead, he argues, the text is 'actualized' by the reader to become a 'virtual' aesthetic work. At the heart of Iser's model of reading is the idea that texts produce uncertainties or gaps in readers' comprehension, and that these gaps spur the reader to produce connections which 'complete' the text. 'Whenever the reader bridges the gaps', Iser declares, 'communication begins.'

There are a number of useful critical overviews of Iser's work: in addition to Vincent Leitch's summary in Chapter 2, below, see William Ray, *Literary Meaning* (1984), Chapters 3 and 4, for an account of Iser in the context of the phenomenological aesthetics of Roman Ingarden; Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory*, Chapter 3, for an account of Iser in the context of German *Rezeptionsästhetik* (1984); and Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader* (1987), Chapter 6, for a consideration of Iser's place in reader-response criticism more generally; finally, for a critical account of *The Act of Reading*, see Samuel Weber's essay, 'Caught in the Act of Reading' (1986).

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This is why the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in

* Reprinted from SUSAN R. SULEIMAN and INGE CROSMAN (eds), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 106–19.

find two basic differences between the text–reader relationship and the dyadic interaction between social partners.

Now, it is the very lack of ascertainability and defined intention that brings about the text–reader interaction, and here there is a vital link with dyadic interaction. Social communication, as we have seen, arises out of the fact that people cannot experience how others experience them, and not out of the common situation or out of the conventions that join both partners together. The situations and conventions regulate the manner in which gaps are filled, but the gaps in turn arise out of the inexperienceability and, consequently, function as a basic inducement to communication. Similarly, it is the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process; the lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference corresponds to the 'no-thing', which brings about the interaction between persons. Asymmetry and the 'no-thing' are all different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank, which underlies all processes of interaction. With dyadic interaction, the imbalance is removed by the establishment of pragmatic connections resulting in an action, which is why the preconditions are always clearly defined in relation to situations and common frames of reference. The imbalance between text and reader, however, is undefined, and it is this very indeterminacy that increases the variety of communication possible.

Now, if communication between text and reader is to be successful, clearly the reader's activity must also be controlled in some way by the text. The control cannot be as specific as in *a face-to-face-situation*, equally it cannot be as determinate as a social code, which regulates social interaction. However, the guiding devices operative in the reading process have to initiate communication and to control it. This control cannot be understood as a tangible entity occurring independently of the process of communication. Although exercised *by* the text, it is not *in* the text. This is well illustrated by a comment Virginia Woolf made on the novels of Jane Austen:

> Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon character. . . . The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense. Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future. . . . Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen's greatness.[8]

What is missing from the apparently trivial scenes, the gaps arising out of the dialogue – this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said 'expands' to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound. The 'enduring form of life' which Virginia Woolf speaks of is not manifested on the printed page; it is a product arising out of the interaction between text and reader.

Communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text–reader relationship revolves. Hence, the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text. There is, however, another place in the textual system where text and reader converge, and that is marked by the various types of negation which arise in the course of the reading. Blanks and negations both control the process of communication in their own different ways: the blanks leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and so spur the reader into coordinating these perspectives and patterns – in other words, they induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text. The various types of negation invoke familiar and determinate elements or knowledge only to cancel them out. What is cancelled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader's attitude toward what is familiar or determinate – in other words, he is guided to adopt a position *in relation* to the text.

In order to spotlight the communication process we shall confine our consideration to how the blanks trigger off and simultaneously control the reader's activity. Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously prompt acts of ideation on the reader's part. Consequently when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks 'disappear'.

If we are to grasp the unseen structure that regulates but does not formulate the connection or even the meaning, we must bear in mind the