XIII. READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Reader-response theory, one of the important recent developments in literary analysis, arose in large measure as a reaction against the New Criticism, which dominated this field for roughly a half-century. The New Criticism, or formalist approach, numbered some of the most important names in American and British literature among its theorists, practitioners, and popularizers, figures such as I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and R. P. Blackmur. (It should be added that these men were by no means of one mind on formalism; indeed, Richards and Blackmur both wrote essays that question basic New Critical trends and suggest more than a little sympathy with reader-oriented theory.)

Though formalism is treated in chapter 2 of this book, it will not be amiss to rehearse the main lines of it again. At the risk of oversimplifying and thereby misrepresenting it, it may be said that formalism regards a piece of literature as an art object with an existence of its own, independent of or not necessarily related to its author, its readers, the historical
time it depicts, or the historical period in which it was written. Its meaning emerges when readers scrutinize it and it alone, without regard to any of the aforementioned considerations. Such scrutiny results in the perception of the literary work as an organic whole wherein all the parts fit together and are so perfectly related as to form an objective meaning. Formalism concentrates on the text as the sole source of interpretation. The poem or play or story has its meaning in itself and reveals that meaning to a critic-reader who examines it on its own terms. The aim of formalist criticism is to show how the work achieves its meaning.

This formalist critical perspective is the result of a view that sees literature itself not essentially as a means to an end (the way the Greeks looked at it), or as an expression of individualism and emotion and common connections of all human beings (salient romantic tendencies), or as the product of complex psychological impulses (a modern psychoanalytic point of view). Rather, formalism sees literature as a unique and peculiar kind of knowledge, which presents humans with the deepest truths related to them, truths that science is unable to disclose. It has its own language, a language different from and more intense than ordinary (scientific) language. This language is not, however, subjective or anarchic. It is comprehensible and discernible by a rigorous and systematic methodology: close reading and the application of the concepts and vocabulary of literary analysis. Paradoxically, though denigrating science as the sole means of knowing, formalist critics employ the techniques of science in interpreting literary art. Formalism, then, focuses on the text, finding all meaning and value in it and regarding everything else as extraneous, including readers, whom formalist critics regard as downright dangerous as sources of interpretation. To rely on readers as a source of meaning is to fall victim to subjectivism, relativism, and other types of critical madness.

Reader-response critics take a radically different approach. They feel that readers have been ignored in discussions of the reading process instead of being the central concern as they should have been. The argument goes something like this. A text does not even exist, in a sense, until it is read by some reader. Indeed, the reader has a part in creating or actually does create the text. It is somewhat like the old question posed in philosophy classes: if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? Reader-response critics are saying that in effect, if a text does not have a reader, it does not exist—or at least, it has no meaning. It is readers, with whatever experience they bring to the text, who give it its meaning. Whatever meaning it may have inheres in the reader, and thus it is the reader who should say what a text means.

We should, perhaps, point out here that reader-response theory is by no means a monolithic critical position. Those who give an important place to readers and their responses in interpreting a work come from a number of different critical camps, not excluding formalism, which is the target of the heaviest reader-response attacks. Reader-response critics see formalist critics as narrow, dogmatic, elitist, and certainly wrong-headed in essentially refusing readers even a place in the reading-interpretive process. Conversely, reader-response critics see themselves, as Jane Tompkins has put it, “willing to share their critical authority with less tutored readers and at the same time to go into partnership with psychologists, linguists, philosophers, and other students of mental functioning” (Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980]: 223).

Although reader-response ideas were present in critical writing as long ago as the 1920s, most notably in that of I. A. Richards, and in the 1930s in D. W. Harding’s and Louise Rosenblatt’s work, it is not until the mid-century that they begin to gain increasing currency. Walker Gibson, writing in College English in February 1950, talks about “mock readers,” who enact roles which actual readers feel compelled to play because the author clearly expects them to by the way the text is presented (“Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers,” College English 11.5 [1950]: 265–69). By the 1960s and continuing into the present as a more or less concerted movement, reader-response criticism had gained enough advocates to mount a frontal assault on the bastions of formalism.
Because the ideas underlying reader-response criticism are complex, and because their proponents frequently present them in technical language, it will be well to enumerate the forms that have received most attention and to attempt to clear a definition of them as possible.

Let us review once again the basic premises of reader-oriented theory, realizing that individual reader-response theorists will differ on a given point but that the following tenets reflect the main perspectives in the position as a whole. First, in literary interpretation, the text is not the most important component; the reader is. In fact, there is no text unless there is a reader. And the reader is the only one who can say what the text is; in a sense, the reader creates the text as much as the author does. This being the case, to arrive at meaning, critics should reject the autonomy of the text and concentrate on the reader and the reading process, the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text.

This premise perplexes people trained in the traditional methods of literary analysis. It declares that reading-response theory is subjective and relative, whereas earlier theories sought for as much objectivity as possible in a field of study that has a high degree of subjectivity by definition. Paradoxically, the ultimate source of subjectivity in modern science itself, which has become increasingly skeptical that any objective knowledge is possible. Einstein’s theory of relativity stands as the best known expression of that doubt. Also, the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn’s demonstration that scientific fact is dependent on the observer’s frame of reference reinforces the claims of subjectivity (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962]).

Another special feature of reader-response theory is that it is based on rhetoric, the art of persuasion, which has a long tradition in literature dating back to the Greeks, who originally employed it in oratory. It now refers to the myriad devices or strategies used to get the reader to respond to the literary work in certain ways. Thus, by establishing the reader firmly in the literary equation, the ancients may be said to be precursors of modern reader-response theory. Admittedly, however, when Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Cicero, and Quintilian applied rhetorical principles in judging a

work, they concentrated on the presence of the formal elements within the work rather than on the effect they would produce on the reader.

In view, then, of the emphasis on the audience in reader-response criticism, its relationship to rhetoric is quite obvious. Wayne Booth in his Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) was among the earliest of modern critics to restore readers to consideration in the interpretive act. The New Criticism, which strongly influenced the study of literature, and still does, had actually proscribed readers, maintaining that it was a critical fallacy, the affective fallacy, to mention any effects that a piece of literature might have on them. And while Booth did not go as far as some critics in assigning readers the major role in interpretation, he certainly did give them prominence and called rhetoric “the author’s means of controlling his reader” (Preface to Rhetoric of Fiction). For example, in a close reading of Jane Austen’s Emma, Booth demonstrates the rhetorical strategies that Austen uses to ensure the reader’s seeing things through the heroine’s eyes.

In 1925 I. A. Richards, usually associated with the New Critics, published Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt), in which he constructed an affective system of interpretation, that is, one based on emotional responses. Unlike the New Critics who were to follow in the next two decades, Richards conceded that the scientific conception of truth is the correct one and that poetry provides only pseudo-statements. These pseudo-statements, however, are crucial to the psychic health of humans because they have now replaced religion as fulfilling our desire—“appetency” is Richards’s term—for truth, that is, for some vision of the world that will satisfy our deepest needs. Matthew Arnold had in the nineteenth century predicted that literature would fulfill this function. Richards tested his theory by asking Cambridge students to write their responses to and assessments of a number of short unidentified poems of varying quality. He then analyzed and classified the responses and published them along with his own interpretations in Practical Criticism (New York: Harcourt, 1929). Richards’s methodology is decidedly reader-response, but the use he made of his data is
new critical. He arranged the responses he had received into categories according to the degrees in which they differed from the "right" or "more adequate" interpretation, which he demonstrated by referring to "the poem itself."

Louise Rosenblatt, Walker Gibson, and Gerald Prince are critics who, like Richards, affirm the importance of the reader but are not willing to relegate the text to a secondary role. Rosenblatt feels that irrelevant responses finally have to be excluded in favor of relevant ones and that a text can exist independently of readers. However, she advances a transactional theory: a poem comes into being only when it receives a proper ("aesthetic") reading, that is, when readers "compensate" a given text (The Reader, the Text, the Poem [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978]). Gibson, essentially a formalist, proposes a mock reader, a role which the real reader plays because the text asks him or her to play it "for the sake of the experience." Gibson posits a dialogue between a speaker (the author?) and the mock reader. The critic, overhearing this dialogue, paraphrases it, thereby revealing the author's strategies for getting readers to accept or reject whatever the author wishes them to. Gibson by no means abandons the text, but he injects the reader further into the interpretive operation as a way of gaining fresh critical insights. Using a different terminology, Prince adopts a perspective similar to Gibson's. Wondering why critics have paid such close attention to narrators (omniscient, first person, unreliable, etc.) and have virtually ignored readers, Prince too posits a reader, whom he calls the narratee, one of a number of hypothetical readers to whom the story is directed. These readers, actually produced by the narrative, include the real reader, with book in hand; the virtual reader, for whom the author thinks he is writing; and the ideal reader of perfect understanding and sympathy; yet none of these is necessarily the narratee. Prince demonstrates the strategies by which the narrative creates the readers ("Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in Reader-Response Criticism, ed. Jane Tompkins, 7-25).

The critics mentioned so far—except Prince—are the pioneers, or perhaps more accurately, the advance guard of the reader-response movement. While continuing to insist on the importance of the text in the interpretive act, they equally insist that the reader be taken into account; not to do so will, they maintain, either impoverish the interpretation or render it defective. As the advance guard, they have cleared the way for those who have become the principal theorists of reader-response criticism. Though there will be disagreement on who belongs in this latter group, most scholars would recognize Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, and Stanley Fish as having major significance in the movement.

Wolfgang Iser is a German critic who applies the philosophy of phenomenology to the interpretation of literature. Phenomenology stresses the perceiver's (in this case, the reader's) role in any perception (in this case, reading experience) and asserts the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of separating anything known from the mind that knows it. According to Iser, the critic should not explain the text as an object but its effect on the reader. Iser's espousal of this position, however, has not taken him away from the text as a central part of interpretation. He also has posited an implied reader, one with "roots firmly planted in the structure of the text" (The Act of Reading [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978]: 34). Still, his phenomenological beliefs keep him from the formalist notion that there is one essential meaning of a text that all interpretations must try to agree on. Readers' experiences will govern the effects the text produces on them. Moreover, Iser says, a text does not tell readers everything; there are "gaps" or "blanks," which he refers to as the indeterminacy of the text. Readers must fill these in and thereby assemble the meaning(s), thus becoming coauthors in a sense. Such meanings may go far beyond the single "best" meaning of the formalist because they are the products of such varied reader backgrounds. To be sure, Iser's implied readers are fairly sophisticated: they bring to the contemplation of the text a conversance with the conventions that enables them to decode the text. But the text can transcend any set of literary or critical conventions, and readers with widely different backgrounds may fill in those blanks and gaps with new and unconventional meanings. Iser's stance, then, is phenomenological: at the center of interpretation lies the reader's experience. Nor does this cre-
Horizons of expectations do not establish the final meaning of a work. Thus, according to Jauss, we cannot say that a work is universal, that it will make the same appeal to or impact on readers of all eras. Is it possible, then, ever to reach a critical verdict about a piece of literature? Jauss thinks it is possible only to the extent that we regard our interpretations as stemming from a dialogue between past and present and thereby representing a fusion of horizons.

The importance of psychology in literary interpretation has long been recognized. Plato and Aristotle, for example, attributed strong psychological influence to literature. Plato saw this influence as essentially baneful: literature aroused people's emotions, especially those that ought to be stringently controlled. Conversely, Aristotle argued that literature exerted a good psychological influence; in particular, tragedy did, by effecting in audiences a catharsis or cleansing or purging of emotions. Spectators were thus calmed and satisfied, not excited or frenzied, after their emotional encounter.

As we noted in our earlier chapter on the psychological approach, one of the world's preeminent depth psychologists, Sigmund Freud, has had an incalculable influence on literary analysis with his theories about the unconscious and about the importance of sex in explaining much human behavior. Critics, then, have looked to Plato and Aristotle in examining the psychological relations between a literary work and its audience and to Freud in seeking to understand the unconscious psychological motivations of the characters in the literary work and in the author.

If, however, followers of Freud have been more concerned with the unconscious of literary characters and their creators, more recent psychological critics have focused on the unconscious of readers. Norman Holland, one such critic, argues that all people inherit from their mother an identity theme or fixed understanding of the kind of person they are. Whatever they read is processed to make it fit their identity theme ("The Miller's Wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive Theory of Reading," New Literary History 17 [1986]: 423–47). In other words, readers interpret texts as expressions of their own personalities or psyches and thereby use their interpretations as a means of coping.

Holland's theory, for all of its emphasis on readers and their psychology, does not deny or destroy the independence of the text. It exists as an object and as the expression of another mind, something different from readers themselves, something they can project onto. But David Bleich, who calls his variety of reader-response subjectivism, does deny that the text exists independent of readers (Subjective Criticism [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978]). Bleich accepts the arguments of such contemporary philosophers of science as Thomas S. Kuhn who deny that objective facts exist. Such a position asserts that even what passes for scientific observation of something—of anything—is still merely individual and subjective perception occurring in a special context. Bleich claims that individuals everywhere classify things into three essential groups: objects, symbols, and people. Literature, a mental creation (as opposed to a concrete one), would thus be considered a symbol. A text may be an object in that it is paper (or other matter) and print, but its meaning depends on the symbolization in the minds of readers. Meaning is not found; it is developed. Better human relations will result from readers with widely differing views sharing and comparing their responses and thereby discovering more about motives and strategies for reading. The honesty and tolerance required in such operations is bound to help in self-knowledge, which, according to Bleich, is the most important goal for everyone.

The last of the theorists to be treated in this discussion is Stanley Fish, who calls his technique of interpretation affective stylistics. Like other reader-oriented critics, Fish rebel against the so-called rigidity and dogmatism of the New Critics and especially against the tenet that a poem is a sin-

gle, static object, a whole that has to be understood in its entirety at once. Fish's pronouncements on reader-response theory have come in stages. In an early stage, he argued that meaning in a literary work is not something to be extracted, as a dentist might pull a tooth; meaning must be negotiated by readers, a line at a time. Moreover, they will be surprised by rhetorical strategies as they proceed. Meaning is what happens to readers during this negotiation. A text, in Fish's view, could lead readers on, even set them up, to make certain interpretations, only to undercut them later and force readers into new and different readings. So, the focus is on the reader; the process of reading is dynamic and sequential. Fish does insist, however, on a high degree of sophistication in readers: they must be familiar with literary conventions and must be capable of changing when they perceive they have been tricked by the strategies of the text. His term for such readers is "informed" (Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost" [Berkeley: U of California P, 1967]).

Fish later modified the method described above by attributing more initiative to the reader and less control by the text in the interpretive act. Fish's altered position holds that readers actually create a piece of literature as they read it. Fish concludes that every reading results in a new interpretation that comes about because of the strategies that readers use. The text as an independent director of interpretation has in effect disappeared. For Fish, interpretation is a communal affair. The readers just mentioned are informed; they possess linguistic competence, they form interpretive communities that have common assumptions; and, to repeat, they create texts when they pool their common reading techniques. These characteristics mean that such readers are employing the same or similar interpretive strategies and are thus members of the same interpretive community (Is There a Text in This Class? [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980]).

It seems reasonable to say that there may be more than one response or interpretation of a work of literature and that this is true because responders and interpreters see things differently. It seems equally accurate to observe that to claim the meaning of literature rests exclusively with individual readers, whose opinions are equally valid, is to make literary
analysis ultimately altogether relative. Somewhere within these two points of view most critics and interpreters will fall.

The procedure that we have followed in the other chapters, defining a critical approach and then applying it to four major pieces of literature representing the principal genres, will not work in as definite a way in reader-response criticism. Here, however, to illustrate, we shall cite, arbitrarily, two reader-responses to well-known works. Steven Mailloux’s reading of Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is an engaging and convincing analysis of this complex narrative based on the thesis that snares and entanglements laid by an unreliable narrator serve to confuse readers until they learn to avoid such traps and arrive at some understanding based on their own interpretation of the characters’ actions and not the omniscient author’s (Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction [Itaca and London: Cornell UP, 1984]: 73–92). Mailloux’s reading of Huckleberry Finn combines a rhetorical approach, decidedly reader-oriented, and the new historicism, which stresses contemporary newspapers, magazine articles, public sentiment, prevailing ideologies, and so on (“Reading Huckleberry Finn: The Rhetoric of Performed Ideology,” New Essays on Huckleberry Finn, ed. Louis Budd [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985]: 107–33). A highly personalized, psychologized reader-response to Hamlet appears in Norman Holland’s “Hamlet—My Greatest Creation,” pages 171–76. Here, the focus is on the connection between words—proximity—and parental violence or neglect. Though ingenious, this interpretation is less idiosyncratic than his reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” mentioned earlier.

To summarize, two distinguishing features characterize reader-response criticism. One is the effect of the literary work on the reader, hence the moral-philosophical-psychological-rhetorical emphases in reader-response analysis. (How does the work affect the reader, and what strategies or devices have come into play in the production of those effects?) The second feature is the relegation of the text to secondary importance. (The reader is of primary importance.) Thus, reader-response criticism attacks the authority of the text. This is where subjectivism comes in. If a text cannot have any existence except in the mind of the reader, then the text loses its authority. There is a shift from objective to subjective perspective. Texts mean what individual readers say they mean or what interpretive communities of readers say they mean. Since this is the case, the application of the reader-response approach—to Huckleberry Finn, for example—could result, at least theoretically, in as many readings of a work as there are readers. It would involve positing a hypothetical reader, whose response, while possibly interesting, would be random and arbitrary. Indeed, which reader response should we employ, since there are a number? If we have made the main reader-responses clear in principle to the readers of this book, we shall have accomplished our purpose. They may then apply them as they will. Thus, interpretation becomes the key to meaning—as it always is—but without the ultimate authority of the text or the author. The important element in reader-response criticism is the reader, and the effect (or affect) of the text on the reader.

When reader-response critics begin to analyze the effect of the text on the reader, the analysis often resembles formalist criticism or rhetorical criticism or psychological criticism. The major distinction is the emphasis on the reader's response in the analysis. Meaning inheres in the reader and not in the text. This is where reception theory fits in. The same text can be interpreted by different readers or communities of readers in very different ways. A text's interpretive history may vary considerably, as with Freudian interpretations of Hamlet versus earlier interpretations. Readers bring their own cultural heritage along with them in their responses to literary texts, a fact which allows for the principle that texts speak to other texts only through the intervention of particular readers. Thus, reader-response criticism can appropriate other theories—as all theories attempt to do.

Reader-response theory is likely to strike many people as both esoteric and too subjective. Unquestionably, readers had been little considered in the New Criticism; but they may have been over-emphasized by the theorists who seek to give them the final word in interpreting literature. Communica-
tion as a whole is predicated on the demonstrable claim that there are common, agreed-upon meanings in language, however rich, metaphorical, or symbolic. To contend that there are, even in theory, as many meanings in a poem as there are readers strongly calls into question the possibility of intelligible discourse. That some of the theorists themselves are not altogether comfortable with the logical implications of their position is evidenced by their positing of mock readers, informed readers, real readers, and implied readers—by which they mean readers of education, sensitivity, and sophistication.

Despite the potential dangers of subjectivism, reader-response criticism has been a corrective to literary dogmatism and a reminder of the richness, complexity, and diversity of viable literary interpretations, and it seems safe to predict that readers will never again be completely ignored in arriving at verbal meaning.