

## FORMALIST CRITICISM AND READER-RESPONSE THEORY

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The article deals with the interaction of formalism as a trend in language and literature studies, on the one hand, and a teaching method, a technique of teaching to understand and investigate literary text proceeding from its structure and content, on the other hand. One of the main principles is dialogism (M. Bakhtin) that creates the coeducation between the writer and reader. Thus the process becomes bilateral, or even multilateral and it includes criticism on both parts — a teacher and a student-reader as they are interpreting a literary text.

**Key words:** literary criticism, formalism, dialogism, coeducation, readerly, reader-response theory, literarism.

### I. INTRODUCTION TO FORMALISM

While the later pedagogical programs established by some new critics suggest that New Criticism's doctrinal lines for membership and practice were clearly delineated, the actual theoretical positions of many formalist critics with ties to this movement contradict such an idea. The critics who debated about the shape and concepts of formalism in scholarly journals and groundbreaking monographs did not draw such boundaries as facilely or exclusively as many literary historians imply.

The influential work by I.A. Richards [11], for example, in developing a foundational theory of formalism found in such works as "Principles of Literary Criticism" (1924) and "Practical Criticism" (1929) is nuanced and perceptive, offering nothing as cross or authoritative as its later permutations in the classroom texts developed by such American New Critics as C. Brooks and R. Warren. They make fine use of Richards's techniques in "Understanding Poetry" (1938) and "Understanding Fiction" (1945). However, in taking Richards's theory into the classroom via such texts, the theoretical underpinning of the various techniques was often omitted or ignored.

Perhaps postmodern theory owes Krieger a debt for his reluctance to abandon humanism altogether [8; 9]. In recent years such postmodern theorists as Ihab Hassan in "The Postmodern Turn" (2001) and S. Yarbrough in "Deliberate Criticism Toward a Postmodern Humanism" (1991) have attempted to negotiate a space for what may be seen as a permutation or evolution of Krieger's own desire for faith in human connection.

This instance brings to mind recent developments thought that call for a move away from our sole reliance upon the logos and suggest ways to 'think' with one's body. Having said this, in many ways Brooks's understanding of criticism fits neatly with other critics of the day. For example, Brooks was adamant about the exclusion of history

from the study of literature. Attacking historicism, Brooks asserts that ‘almost every English professor is diligently devoting himself to discovering “what porridge had John Keats” [8]. This is a typical research: the background of English literature. Moreover, we hopefully fill our survey textbooks with biographical notes on the poets whose poems are there displayed. Nevertheless, “one may know what the poet ate and what he wore and what accidents to him and what books he read and yet not know his poetry” [8. P. 35—36]. According to Krieger, Frye damns criticism that he refers to as ‘aesthetic superstition’. A form of criticism that sees its work as an end in itself. Frye calls for a criticism that does not believe the ‘aesthetic or contemplative aspect of art’ is the final rest place of art or criticism [8. P. 349]. Instead, he contends that “the moment we go from the individual work of art to the sense of the total form of art, the art becomes no longer the object of aesthetic contemplation but an ethical instrument, participating in the work of civilization” [8. P. 349].

Gary Saul Morson and Gary Emerson astutely observe that American and Russian formalist conspicuously diverge in their competing definitions of ‘literariness’. In western formulations of the concept, literariness refers exclusively to the nature of poetic language. Russian formalists, however, advocate a more expansive definition of the term, which, in their estimation, accounts for the aesthetic and material components inherent in a wide range of literary forms [10. P. 18; 64]. Their caution against confusing the notion of heteroglossia with the concept of polyphony. Quite obviously, both terms refer to the aspects of multiple-voiced narratives [10. P. 18—64] yet “polyphony is not even roughly synonymous with heteroglossia”, Morson and Emerson write, “the latter term describes the diversity of speech styles in a language, the former has to do with the position of the author in a text; the two concepts pertain to fundamentally different kinds of phenomena, although the critical practice of conflating Bakhtin’s categories has tended to blur the distinction for many readers” [10. P. 232]. As Michael Gardiner [5] reminds us, it is important to remain cognizant of the official culture’s significant place in the same social phenomenon that produces the carnivalesque moment. Synchronous with carnival’s utopian effervescence, officialdom’s hegemonic nature ensures that it will attempt to stabilize the cultural continuum via a series of staid, conservative, and potentially oppressive gestures. As Gardiner observes: “A crucial aspect of carnival is its critical function, the refusal to acquiesce to the legitimacy of the present social system which, for many theories, is the hallmark of the oppositional utopia” [5. P. 260]. M.M. Bakhtin first encountered the term in the work of Soviet physiologist A.A. Ukhtomsky. Bakhtin attended Ukhtomsky’s lecture on the intersections between the chronotope and biology [1. P. 84].

## II. READER-RESPONSE THEORY, THE THEORETICAL PROJECT

Reader-response criticism devotes considerable attention to the act of reading itself, particularly in terms of the many different ways in which readers respond to literary texts. Reader-response criticism theoretical apotheosis during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exists as a signal moment in poststructuralism that shared in the establishment of the self-referential foundations of various postmodern critical paradigms and, perhaps most importantly, cultural studies. As a theoretical paradigm,

reader-response criticism explores three principal questions: 1) Do our various responses to literary works produce the same (or similar) readings? 2) Can literary texts genuinely enjoy as many meanings as readers are able to create? 3) Are some readings essentially more valid and justifiable than others? Reader-response criticism also provides us with models for understanding the reading process itself, as well as with mechanisms for exploring the ways in which the construction of literary works shares in the production of meaning. Although literary historians often suggest that reader-response theory critical heyday begins in the 1970s and continues in various formulations and reformulations into the present, the paradigm conception finds its roots well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century in ancient Greek and Roman cultures that viewed literatures as a rhetorical device for manipulating a given audience's reactions.

In many ways, reader-response criticism would seem to function as a response to, or redaction of formalism, which focuses exclusively on the materiality of the text rather than on such external forces as biography, history or audience. Yet, as Jane Tompkins [15] astutely demonstrates in her important anthology, "Reader-response criticism: From formalism to poststructuralism", reader-response criticism finds its theoretical origins well within the boundaries of formalism and the new criticism. By the end of 1950s, scholars such as W. Gibson [6] had begun to articulate new conceptions of formalist studies that reconceived the new critical boundaries between the authorial production of texts and their literary consumers or readers. Of particular significance is Gibson's formulation of "the 'mock reader', the quasi-persona that the text invites the reader to assume via the language and rhetorical devices inherent in a given literary work. According to W. Gibson, the 'mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation" [6. P. 2]. The mock reader, moreover, functions as the mask that readers wear as they explore the mock possibilities available in the narrative. For Gibson, understanding the relationship between the author and ourselves allows readers to recognize the interconnections between the narrative authorial voices and the fictive modifications or manifestations of ourselves in the text. Even more significantly, Gibson contends that distinguishing "between the mock world of the literary experience and the real world of everyday experience 'prepares us for comprehending that' in the end our appeals for decisions of value are toward sanctions of society in a very real world indeed" [6. P. 6]. Gibson's valuation of the reader's role in construction literary meaning underscores a paradigm shift of sort as the critics attempts to fashion a place for readerly (a reader) attributes within the previously more confining spaces of the new criticism. As Jane Tompkins [15] observes, "The concept of the mock reader allows the critic to dramatize the social attitudes implicit in a text by reconstructing the kinds of understandings and complicities narrators and mock readers arrive at over the heads of the characters and quite apart from the manifest content of the prose" [15. Introduction, xi]. In short, the notion of the mock reader underscores formalism's evolution toward a readerly oriented framework of literary interpretation. In many ways, the development of reader-response criticism via the auspices of the new criticism finds its roots in the groundbreaking work of I.A. Richards in the 1920s and Louise M. Rosenblatt during the 1930s. Although

Richards (1920s) was generally regarded as one of formalism's theoretical progenitors, Richards also assisted in creating the firmament for new, readerly based theories of literary interpretation. In *Practical Criticism: A study of Literary Judgment* [11]. Richards identifies the ways in which readers examine the authenticity of a given literary work through the narrative's effect on their own emotions and experience. According to Richards, readers establish an 'attitude' about a narrative, "Some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavor or coloring of feeling; and we use language to *express* these feelings, this nuance of interest. Equally, when we pick it up, rightly or wrongly", Richards adds, "It seems inextricably part of what we receive" [11. P. 175].

By registering the significant role of a reader in the interpretive process and in the construction of meaning, Richards created the foundation for Rosenblatt's landmark postulation of 'transactional' reading in such volumes as *Literature as Exploration* [12] and four decades later, at the zenith of the reader-response movement. *The reader, the text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* [13. P. 197]. In the former volume, Rosenblatt demonstrates the existence of a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text. Perhaps even more significantly, she challenges the new critical dicta regarding critical objectivity. Interestingly, Rosenblatt describes this reader-intensive approach to literature as a 'new moral attitude' and contends that critics should be more 'human' during the act of interpretation. "Instead of simply approving or condemning, one might seek to understand", Rosenblatt writes on "fixed rules of conduct unconditionally applied to all under circumstances, judgment should be passed only after the motives of the behavior and the particular circumstances had been understood" [13. P. 222]. In addition to exploding the notions that literary study must be conducted via rigid systems of interpretation and by virtue of scientifically refined principles of observation, Rosenblatt argues that the act of reading provides us with the opportunities for 'vicarious experience', indeed, for actively engaging in and responding to literary texts. "From enhanced perceptions may flow a sense of the human and practical implications of the information that has been acquired", she observes. "This information is no longer words to be rattled off; the words now point toward actual human situations and feelings" [13. P. 228]. In *Literature as Exploration* [12], also seek, rather boldly in retrospect, to recast the nature of the reading experience for a new generation of critics and readers. They argue that literary criticism existing terminology, essentially the deliberately detached vocabulary of the new criticism; serve only to 'obscure' the value and richness of the reading process. Hence, Rosenblatt posits that critics must differentiate between the text and the meaning that it evokes. 'In the past', Rosenblatt writes, "reading has too often been thought of as an interaction, the printed page impressing its meaning on the reader's mind or the reader extracting the meaning embedded in the text" [12. P. 25]. Attempting to reframe our conception of the reading experience, Rosenblatt contends that "reading is a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral", she adds, "in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed" [12. P. 26]. By highlighting the synergistic relationship between reader and text, Rosenblatt explodes formalist notions of the reading process as a neutral

event that occurs in an historical or cultural vacuum. Having established the foundations for new ways of thinking about the reading experience and its reciprocal nature, Rosenblatt underscores reading's inevitably personal and intrinsically human qualities. 'It is a kind of experience valuable in and for itself, and yet or perhaps, therefore, it can also have a liberating and fortifying effect in the ongoing life of the reader'. Rosenblatt writes [13. P. 277]. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Rosenblatt supplies reader response critics with an interpretational matrix for explaining the motives of readers and their 'transaction' with literary texts. Firstly, Rosenblatt identifies two different types of reading strategies of 'aesthetic reading', in which the reader devotes particular attention to what occurs during the actual reading event, and 'non-aesthetic reading', a reading strategy as a kind of 'efferent' reading in which readers primarily themselves in what will be derived materially from the experience [12. P. 23—25]. Secondly, efferent readers reflect upon the verbal symbols in literature, "what the symbols designate, what they may be contributing to the end result that (a reader) seeks the information, the concepts, the guide to action, that will be left with (a reader) when the reading is over" [12. P. 27]. Rosenblatt describes the act of reading itself whether aesthetic or nonaesthetic as a transaction that derives from the peculiar array of experiences that define the reader's persona: "Each reader brings to the transaction not only a specifies past life and literary history, not only a repertory of internalized 'codes', but also a very active present, with all its preoccupations, anxieties, questions, and aspiration", she writes [12. P. 144). There is little question among literary historians that Rosenblatt was clearly well ahead of her time, particularly in terms of the publication of *Literature as Exploration*, which emerged during formalism's theoretical hegemony. The thrust of the reader, the text, the poem finds its origins in a seminal 1969 essay *Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading*, a signal moment in the development of reader-response theory. During the 1960s, the New Criticism influence had waned rather substantially under the weight of 'literary study growing eclectic' and gestures toward interdisciplinarity. Recent advances in semantics, semiology, sociolinguistics, and psychoanalysis fueled the emergence of structuralism, and reader-response criticism with its timely exploration of the reader's significant place in the literary experience flowered soon thereafter at the intellectual cusp of poststructuralism. Any survey of reader-response criticism must, by virtue of the paradigm's multidisciplinary aspects, include attention to the movement's various forays into such critical modes as rhetoric, structuralism, history, psychology, and feminism. Stanley Fish's important work as one of reader-response theory's most visible proponents will be discussed below in concert with close analysis of the paradigm's phenomenological and epistemological manifestations.

As with Rosenblatt's postulation of the reading transaction, Wayne C. Booth [3] creation of a communicative model for understanding the reading process functions as a key moment in the evolution of reader-response criticism, especially in terms of its rhetorical aspects. Along with work of French rhetorician G. Genette, Booth's conception of the synergistic relationship between the implied reader and the implied author affords us with a powerful means for recognizing reader-response theory's narratological value. *The Rhetoric of fiction* (1961), Booth identifies the roles of implied authors

and readers in the reading process, as well as the ideological and ethical ramifications of our readings experiences. According to Booth, the implied author functions as the actual author's 'second self', the persona that the reading process invariably constructs or, perhaps more accurately, reconstitutes during the act of reading. Booth is responsible for the text's ultimate verbal meanings, as well as for the value systems that undergird those meanings. "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader", Booth writes in the *Rhetoric of Fiction*, and: "He makes of his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" [3. P. 138].

For Booth, the idea of the implied reader exists as the most significant variable in the formulation of a successful and enjoyable reading experience. According to Booth, such an experience involves two principal factors: 1) the correct identification of the implied reader's belief systems, and 2) the implied author's simultaneous attempt to seek agreement with that reader's values. In Booth's critical schema, the relationship between implied authors and readers takes on deliberate levels of moral significance. As Susan R. Suleiman perceptively observes: "Any criticism that seeks to study the means whereby authors attempt to communicate certain intended meanings or to produce certain intended effects is both rhetorical and audience oriented" [14. P. 10]. In his later work, Booth has devoted considerable attention to the ethical relationship that exists between the readerly audience and the text. In *The Company We Keep* [4], Booth describes this kind of reader-response theory as a form of ethical criticism that examines the interconnections between our lives and the literary works that we consume: "we can no longer pretend that ethical criticism is passé", he writes in *The Company We Keep* [4]. "It is practiced everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, and often badly, partly because it is the most difficult of all critical modes, but partly because we have so little serious talk about why it is important, what purposes it serves, and how it might be done well" [4. P. 19]. Booth argues that ethical criticism theoretical or ideological opponents often misread the paradigm's intent as didactic in nature. Instead, "ethical criticism attempts to describe the encounters of a storyteller's ethos with that of the reader or listener. Ethical critics need not begin with the intent to evaluate, but their descriptions will always entail appraisals of the value of what is being described" [Ibid]. As a form of avant-grade reader-response criticism, Booth's formulation of ethical criticism acknowledges the powerful factors of language and ideology in its textual assessments. "There are no neutral ethical terms", Booth writes, "a fully responsible ethical criticism will make explicit those appraisals that are implicit whenever a reader or listener reports on stories about human beings in action" [4. P. 8]. Booth defines these instances of appraisal, these practical applications of ethical criticism as 'acts of coducation', referential moments in which critics compare their reading experiences with the conclusions of others. Coducation, in Booth's schema valorizes the reflexive relationship that develops between texts and their readers, as well as the equally reflexive manner in which texts postulate meaning. "The question of whether value is in the poem or in the reader is radically and permanently ambiguous, requiring two answers", Booth writes. "Of course the value is not in there, actually, until it is actualized, by the reader. Nevertheless, of course it could not be actualized if it were not there, in potential, in the poem" [4. P. 89].

### III. BEYOND FORMALIST CRITICISM AND READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Despite the increasing hegemony of new, often politically conscious forms of literary critics, the contemporary theoretical project clearly holds a revered place for formalist criticism and reader-response theory. Until recently, formalist and New Critical ideologies were dismissed almost universally in a derisory fashion as decidedly 'old school' ways of reading and thinking about literature. During the 1990s, though, formalist criticism began to enjoy a renaissance of sorts, particularly as a number of theorists sought to historicize the New Criticism place within critical theory relatively brief heritage. Steven Knapp [7], for example, has questioned the validity and value of contemporary literary theory denigration of formalism as a primitive interpretive methodology. As the title of his thoughtful volume suggests, in *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* [7] Knapp demonstrates the inherent limits of our collection rage against our theoretical precursors. As S. Knapp and others have revealed in their scholarship, the fundamental attributes of close reading continue to resound within the interpretive methodologies of the present. Aligned as they with an overarching identity politics, our contemporary schools of criticism differentiate themselves almost exclusively in terms of their particular political imperatives. Yet the scholarly fruits of their inquiries inevitably find their origins in some form of close, formalistic readings of the texts that they choose to further their ideological aims.

As with formalism and the New Criticism, reader-response theory is reaping the benefits of critical theory interest in historicizing its place in the intellectual continuum. As Jane Tompkins's *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism* [15] demonstrates, the reader-response movement began engaging in acts of historicism long before its influence waned within the academy's vaunted corridors. As one of the principal driving forces behind the advent of the cultural studies movement, reader-response theory's basic premises about the complex nature of the reading process continue to exert a substantial influence upon the ways in which we consider the peculiar interrelationship that emerge between ourselves and literary texts. In many ways, the genesis of reader-response theory explains much of the identity politics that pervades contemporary literary criticism. Tompkins [15] reveals, the reader-response movement emerged amidst a flurry of competing voices engaging in debate about various aspects of the reading experience. Their spirited disagreements, however well intentioned, invariably led to ideological entrenchment and theoretical bifurcation. While the reader-response movement resulted in vast intellectual riches regarding our understanding of the reading process itself, its ongoing debate about the problematic of canonicity and the politics of interpretation played a role in engendering the vitriolic 'culture wars' of the 1980s and 1990s as well as the theoretical entrenchment of the present.

If nothing else, the culture wars have demonstrated identity politics with the left and the right drawing upon literary studies as their battleground at its collective nadir. The conservative right political preeminence during the 1980s served as the catalyst for the ensuing culture wars that tested the resiliency of cultural studies and multicul-

turalism while also challenging the intellectual dominion of the inauguration of the intellectual crisis in higher education to secretary of Education William J. Bennett's governmental report on the humanities, "To Reclaim A Legacy" (1984), in which he fans the flames of nationalism and charges American academics with having lost their senses of moral and intellectual purpose when they enacted policies of canon expansion and multicultural stud. While the power and publicity concomitant with Bennett's cabinet provided him with the public voice necessary to strike a strident initial chord within the American public, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and impoverished the souls of Today's Students* [2] imbued the culture wars with the intellectual cachet of a scholarly voice. As the culture wars advanced into the 1990s, proponents of the right continued the culture warrior's onslaught against canon revision, while also increasingly objecting to the manner in which contemporary scholars resorted to the politicization of literary and cultural studies. In its attempt to respond to the right's political and cultural attacks upon its missions, the academy set about solidifying the ideologies of difference that function at the core of its identity politics. Hence, the culture wars not only resulted in a renewed interest in cultural studies, but also in the institutionalization of the aims of the multicultural project. By responding to the explicit threats posed by the culture wars waged by the right, the theoretical project renewed its interpretive claims and clarified its position as an ideologically based form of critique. It also erected a rigid, often dogmatic system of identity politics that frequently measures success in terms of the failures of what it perceives to be its opponents and nothing can be more oppositional than the interpretive mechanism that receives credit for authoring the truth claims of the past.

Yet, formalist criticism and reader-response theory are lessons in themselves about the value indeed, the necessity for fluid and flexible modes of literary interpretation, in its less-ideologically narrow manifestations, formalism exists at the bedrock of the closest readings of literary texts. Similarly, understanding the nature of our reading experiences allows us to comprehend the remarkable synergy that occurs between writers and readers. In short, both critical modes afford us with essential means for understanding the many ways in which we, as writers and readers, produce meaning. All novels, plays, poems, and short stories possess specific formal structures that will determine, in part, a given reader's response; likewise, every reader has a set of preconceived notions about aesthetics, culture, and gender that will determine how the formal structure of a text is read and comes to evoke particular kinds of meanings. Hence, as theorists we enjoy the benefits, often unknowingly and almost certainly uncritically, of the interpretive aspects of the reading process that formalism and reader-response criticism seek to reveal. Although they no longer exist at the zenith of literary fashion, both schools of criticism nevertheless continue to operate at the forefront of literary studies. While we set about renaming them and contemporaneous ideological goals, formalism and reader response theory will always remain as viable as the close readings that we, as theorists will, continue to propound.



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## КРИТИКА ФОРМАЛИЗМА И РЕАКЦИЯ ЧИТАТЕЛЬСКОЙ АУДИТОРИИ

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В статье обсуждается взаимодействие формализма как тенденции в лингвистических и литературных исследованиях, с одной стороны, и как метод обучения, технология понимания и исследования художественного текста исходя из его формы и содержания, — с другой. Один из ведущих принципов — *диалогичность* (М.М. Бахтин), которая создает ситуацию совместного, общего знания между автором и читателем. Таким образом, процесс становится двусторонним или даже многосторонним, включая критическое отношение обеих сторон — преподавателя и студента, поскольку они оба интерпретируют художественный текст.

**Ключевые слова:** литературная критика, формализм, диалогичность, совместное образование, читательская аудитория, теория учета читательской аудитории, литературность.

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