

N. HOLLAND AND HIS READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Reader-response theory arose in large measure as a reaction against the New criticism, or formalistic approach, which dominated literary criticism for nearly half a century. 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. Formalism focuses on the text, finding all meaning and value in it and regarding everything else as extraneous, including readers, whom formalistic critics regard as a dangerous source of interpretation.

Reader-response critics take a radically different approach. They feel that readers have been ignored in discussions of the reading process, when they should have been the central concern. Their argument is: a text does not even exist, in a sense, until it is read by some reader. The reader has a part in creating or actually does create the text. Reader-response critics say that 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. It is the reader who should say what a text means.

Reader-response ideas were present in critical writing already in the 1920s in the works of I. A. Richards, and in the 1930s in the works of D. W. Harding and Louise Rosenblatt, but it was not until the mid-twentieth-century that they began to gain currency.

The ideas underlying reader-response criticism are the following. 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. 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. 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.

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. Rhetoric now refers to the countless devices or strategies used to make the reader 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 the precursors of modern reader-response theory. However, when Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Cicero, and Quintilian apply rhetorical principles in judging a work, they concentrate on the presence of the formal elements within the work rather than on the effect they produce on the reader. In Preface to "Rhetoric of Fiction," Wayne Booth, one of the earliest of modern critics to restore readers to consideration in the interpretive act, calls rhetoric "the author's means of controlling his reader" 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.

Louise Rosenblatt, Walker Gibson, and Gerald Prince 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. Gibson proposes a mock reader, a role that the real reader plays because the text asks him or her to play it "for the sake of the experience." Gibson 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.

The above-mentioned critics are in the vanguard 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. They have cleared the way for those who have become the principal theorists of reader-response criticism. Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, and Stanley Fish have had an enormous impact on the development of reader-response theory.

Norman Holland proceeds from the so-called psychological approach. He tries to understand how a book gets from paper page to an experience in the mind. Do books mean or do readers make meaning? 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 arouses people's emotions, especially those that ought to be stringently controlled. Conversely, Aristotle argued that literature exerts a good psychological influence; tragedy in particular, by effecting in audiences a catharsis

or cleansing of emotions. Spectators are thus calmed and satisfied, not excited or frenzied, after their emotional encounter.

With his theories about the unconscious in explaining much human behavior, Sigmund Freud has had an incalculable influence on literary analysis. In his book "Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare," N. Holland analyses the views of Freud and some Freudians on "Hamlet". He wants to answer the question "Why does Hamlet delay?". Hamlet is able to do anything – except take revenge on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother. Hamlet cannot do that because this man shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Were Hamlet, then, to punish Claudius for murdering his father and marrying his mother, he would condemn himself as well. Therefore, he delays. The fact that the wish is unconscious in all of us explains why for centuries critics could not explain Hamlet's delay. By the time he finally does revenge his father, no less than seven extra people are murdered in the process. Critics say that Hamlet cannot act because of his Oedipus complex. Psychoanalytic experience shows that every child wants to do exactly that. Clinical experience also shows that this childish wish persists in the unconscious mind of the adult.

Here Holland points out that the whole matter of Hamlet's Oedipus complex has almost become one of the corner stones of psychoanalytic theory and at times the question virtually loses its literary origin.

He is interested in actors', critics' and scholars' perception of the Danish prince. When they look at Hamlet, they seem to find there themselves. The 17th and 18th centuries tended to see this hero as a young man of considerable promise, a rationalist, a prince, almost a philosopher-prince. This interpretation of the character of Hamlet did not explain his delay, and that troubled the critics, but not the audience that loved the tragedy of Hamlet. Goethe created the Romantic Hamlet, the one who haunts our stages even today; 19th-century Hamlets are delicate flowers who cannot bring themselves to commit the bloody business.

At any rate, each critic and each historical period seems to find itself in Hamlet. In the 20th century, Hamlet is a man with an Oedipus complex. It happens because the literalistic readings of Hamlet's character lift him out of the play and treat him as a living person. It was Edgar Allan Poe who put his finger on the mistake, *He delays because he is part of the play*.

Working further at his theory N. Holland has focused on the unconscious of readers. He 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, he asserts in "the Miller's wife and the Professors: Questions about the Transactive theory of Reading". In the article he wants to consider how one might apply the theoretical ideas developed (the transactive theory of reading, identity theory, feedback networks, cognitive psychology, the architecture of the brain) to something more practical, the teaching of literature. He gets the same questions repeatedly. Three questions, in particular, always arise:

Doesn't this make every reading totally subjective, so that any one reading is as good as any other?

In teaching, what do you do about misreadings?

Don't people change their readings? I know I read "Huckleberry Finn" differently now from the way I did when I was a child.

In answer, N. Holland states his views, his transactive theory of reading, many times. Although there are obviously shared elements in the reading situation, we can represent someone's reading a poem or a story as a personal transaction – as an expression of character or identity. He does not abandon the text or techniques of interpretation or the social situation within which interpretation takes place. He does not say that a reading is not *also* a function of these things. Quite the contrary! he says. He simply claims that we *can* understand someone's reading as a function of personal identity.

He states that a person – an identity – uses hypotheses with which to sense the poem. The poem responds to those hypotheses, and the individual *feels* whether it is a favorable or unfavorable response and if it is possible to send another hypothesis out around it. Then they are transformed into the individual's inner reality. In other words, readers interpret texts as expressions of their own personalities or psyches and thereby use their interpretations as a means of coping with life.

Reader-response theory is likely to strike many people as both esoteric and too subjective. Readers may have been overemphasized by the theorists who seek to give them the final word in interpreting literature. That some of the theorists themselves are not all together 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 literary interpretations, and it seems safe to predict that readers will never again be completely ignored in arriving at verbal meaning.