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Reader

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1 Definition

A reader is a decoder, decipherer, interpreter of written (narrative) texts or, more generally, of any text in the broad sense of signifying matter.

2 Explication

Real, concrete readers—who have been studied from a variety of points of view (Groeben 1977; Manguel 1996; Franzmann et al. eds. 1999; Schneider 2004)—should be distinguished from more abstract readers. These include, *inter alia*, the authors' ideal readers, who understand perfectly and approve entirely every authorial word or intention (Schönert → Author [1]). They include the various readers posited by students of texts and constituting interpretive devices, like Riffaterre's superreader (1966: 215) or the plain "reader" invoked by so many critics. In addition, they include readers inferrable from texts or explicitly characterized as their addressees, such as Booth's postulated reader ([1961] 1983: 137–44, 177), Gibson's mock reader (1950), Iser's implied reader ([1972] 1974), or the narratee discussed by Genette ([1972] 1980: 259–62, [1983] 1988: 130–34) and Prince (1971, [1973] 1980).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

In the Western tradition, concern with the reader has a long history. It goes back to Plato (e.g. the attack against the negative influence of poetry) and Aristotle (the concept of catharsis), famously manifests itself in Horace, Longinus, the Greco-Roman rhetoricians and their descendants, is found throughout the Renaissance, and persists in the modern period. In fact, though it decreased with the New Criticism's focus on the text itself and denunciation of the intentional and affective fallacies, concern with the reader acquired unprecedented critical prominence in the 1970s.

For most of this history, interest in readers pertains more specifically to the effects of texts on real audiences. Depending on views of the nature and power of language, literature, or art, these effects are thought to be moral, sociopolitical,

psychological, intellectual, esthetic; and real readers are seen as passive instead of active, objects rather than subjects, creatures to entertain, teach, move, reform, or redeem. This orientation changes radically in the second half of the 20th century, when attention is also paid to textually inscribed addressees as well as to the role of audiences in interpretation and evaluation.

3.1 Precursors

Paradoxically, one important precursor of this change is Richards (1929), who is widely regarded as the father of the New Criticism and its objectivist poetics. In a study which also deals with the influence of poetry on the reader and proposes tools for the analysis of literature, Richards analyzed students' interpretive reactions to poems and isolated some of the factors that lead to misreadings, such as critical preconceptions, stock responses, and irrelevant associations. Another important precursor of this change is Rosenblatt (1938). Her preoccupation with the teaching of literature and with the real reader's ability to take part in the literary experience led her to examine that experience, to reject the objectivist position of the New Criticism, and to underline in her transactional theory the interaction between what the reader contributes to the text and the latter's specificity. For Rosenblatt, interpretation crucially depends on the reader's experience and, to be valid, it must not contradict the text or yield conclusions that have no textual basis. Gibson (1950) is a third critic whose work anticipates the reader-oriented theory and criticism of the 1970s. By focusing on the mock reader—a figure implied by the text, a part which flesh-and-blood readers are asked to play and in terms of which they situate themselves vis-à-vis the text and its values—Gibson also pointed to the real audience's interpretive and evaluative role.

Among other students of literature who, before the flowering of audience-oriented criticism, similarly drew attention to readers and their relation to textual meaning, at least Booth ([1961] 1983), Ingarden ([1931] 1973, [1937] 1973), and Sartre ([1948] 1949) should be briefly discussed. Like Gibson, Booth distinguished the real reader of fiction from what he called the reader's second self, a figure created by the author and postulated by the text, which the real reader must be willing to become and with whose views and beliefs s/he must agree in order to enjoy that text. By emphasizing the rhetorical dimension of fiction, Booth departed from the New Critical formalist stance and its attention to texts severed from their authors and readers. Ingarden belonged to a very different tradition, since it is as a phenomenologist that he considered questions of poetics and esthetics. As early as [1931] 1973, he studied the ways in which readers (adequately) realize or concretize a work of art, the ways in which they transform a text or mere series of sentences into an esthetic object by filling gaps or places of indeterminacy in that text. As for

Sartre, in seeking to define literature and the necessary commitment it constitutes and entails, he argued that writers write for their time, for real, historical readers whose freedom they address and depend upon rather than for universal, eternal, ideal readers. He further argued that writing and reading are intimately connected and that the literary object results from their combined action. Indeed, he insisted that, while every text contains the image of the reader toward whom it is directed, every concrete reader is a creator, necessary for the renewed emergence of the literary object and situated between what is given by the writer and what is not.

3.2 The Blossoming of Reader-oriented Criticism

If these various precursors (and others, like Baxtin [1929] 1984 or Burke 1931: 38–56) explore fundamental questions pertaining to the nature of readers and reading, it is in the 1970s that audience-oriented theory or criticism flourishes and that the reader becomes a central figure for many students of literature. Of the many possible reasons for this flourishing, perhaps the most general one is the rejection promoted by various sociopolitical movements in Europe and the United States (the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the German student movement, May 68) of established institutions and authority figures. The spread of anti-authoritarianism and attendant calls for democratizing the academy, aspirations to relevant curricula, reanalyses of the construction, circulation, or distribution of knowledge would result in the questioning of various entrenched principles and methods of textual interpretation and evaluation (New Critical strictures, Marxist injunctions, humanist directives). Indeed, there is no unity among reader-oriented theorists and critics. They differ not only in terms of national origins or contexts but also in terms of presuppositions, programs, aims, and, more particularly, interest in narrative and narratology. As a matter of fact, many of them are not (specifically) concerned with narrative and their work has no (specifically) narratological implications.

Riffaterre (1959, 1966, 1971, 1978), for example, who argued that the style of a text is revealed by the reactions of the “superreader”—a composite of the text’s real readers, akin to what he once called the “average reader” (1959: 164–65)—to textual unpredictabilities, was trying to establish objective criteria for the analysis of style, to develop a structural stylistics, and to account more generally for the semiotics of literature. Culler (1975), much of whose work can also be regarded as semiotico-structuralist, focused on characterizing literary (rather than narrative) competence and conventions of reading. Similarly, the psychoanalytic critic Holland (1968, 1975), whose investigations led him to conclude that the meaning of a literary text is a function of the real reader’s basic “identity theme” or psychological makeup (1975: 56–62), was primarily interested in the effects of personality on

interpretation. Another proponent of “subjective criticism,” Bleich (1975, 1978), who emphasized the influence of reading on self-understanding and the links between reader response and interpretation, was interested in the bases of humanistic knowledge and the reform of the teaching of literature. Jauss (1970, [1977] 1982, 1978), the highly influential advocate of *Rezeptionsästhetik*—which is different from the German tradition of empirical research on real readers (e.g. Groeben 1977; Franzmann et al. eds. 1999)—wanted to reinvigorate literary history when he called for the study of readers’ horizons of expectations and for the elaboration of a history of esthetic response. Like these critics or theorists, Fish (1967, 1980) was not concerned with narratological issues, but with the nature of literature, the goals of criticism, the bases of interpretation. Proposing a feminist approach, Fetterley (1978) developed the notion of a “resisting reader”: according to her, American literature “immasculates” its readers (forces them to think and feel in masculine terms), and she encourages resistance to this male rhetoric by devising ways of reading not as a man but as a woman. Last though by no means least, Radway (1984), who directed her attention to readers of narrative romances, insisted on the different reading assumptions of (lower middle class) women and (academic) men.

3.3 The Implied Reader

Although not working in a narratological vein and although primarily aiming to revitalize literary study by concentrating on readers instead of texts or authors, some theorists and critics in the 1970s produced work of considerable significance for narratology. Perhaps the most influential reader figure in this context is Iser’s implied reader. A leader of the Constance School along with Jauss, Iser, who used a phenomenological approach and a corpus of prose fiction, investigated the act of reading and the contributions of both text and reader to textual meaning ([1970] 1971, [1972] 1974, [1976] 1978). Much like Ingarden, he distinguished between the text, its concretization by the reader, and the work of art resulting from their convergence. He argued that the text pre-structures and guides the production of meaning by gradually supplying skeletal aspects or schematized views of what will become the work of art, while leaving between them areas of indeterminacy or gaps to be filled by the reader completing the artwork. The implied reader, which is not to be confused with a real reader ([1976] 1978: 34), allows Iser to take the text as well as the reading activity into account. Patterned, at least terminologically, after Booth’s implied author (Schmid → Implied Author [2]), the implied reader ([1972] 1974: xii) is both a textual element, an entity deducible from the text, and a meaning-producing mechanism, a set of mental operations involved in sense-making (selecting and organizing information, relating past and present knowledge, anticipating facts and outcomes, constructing and modifying patterns). It includes the schematized aspects, the gaps, and the processes eliminating them, the

constraints and directions set by the text as well as the mental activities of reading. Iser was criticized for distinguishing unproblematically between determinate and indeterminate parts of texts (Fish 1981) and for not sufficiently specifying the nature of the gaps or studying their *raison d'être* (cf. Kloepfer [1979] 1982; Stierle [1975] 1980). He was also criticized for overemphasizing textual input and inadequately exploring the freedom (and variable results) that reading may entail (Mailloux 1982: 51–53). Indeed, the implied reader could even be considered a kind of equivalent to authorial intention and textual meaning or to a set of preferred (Iserian) interpretations. Whatever the validity of these criticisms—and others, directed at Iser's liberal ideological assumptions (Holub 1984: 97–100) or at his failure to give his reader figure a (significant) historical dimension (Suleiman 1980: 25–6)—it remains that the implied reader not only supplied a handy term for students of narrative; it also pointed to the room any (narrative) text provides for the reader and often came to represent the counterpart of the implied author in the structure of narrative transmission (from real author to real reader through implied author, narrator, narratee, and implied reader). Moreover, it helped to emphasize the dynamics of narrative semiosis, to characterize a number of narrative techniques or strategies, to draw attention to the role of virtuality in narrative, and to promote taxonomies of narrative according to the number (or kind) of gaps obtaining.

3.4 The Model Reader

While Iser was more interested in narrative fiction than in narrative and drew mainly on phenomenology to elaborate his implied reader, Eco (1979) explicitly claimed to be interested in narrativity (12) and drew primarily on semiotics to develop the model reader (7–10). Paradoxically, the latter resembles the Iserian figure in many ways. According to Eco, a text is the result of two components, the information which the author supplies and the information which the model reader adds and which is more or less strictly determined by the author's input (206). The model reader, which corresponds to the set of felicity conditions that must be satisfied for the text's potential to be actualized (11), removes indeterminacies. It fills in blanks with (modifiable and replaceable) sets of propositions or "ghost chapters" (214–15) that derive from codes, conventions, interpretive procedures, and knowledge shared with the author. Though Eco may not always succeed in distinguishing clearly between the model reader and actual readers (including himself as reader), between description, interpretation, and prescription, his analysis, like that of Iser, directs attention to the play of narrative semiosis. More notably, through its characterization of "ghost chapters" and the "possible worlds" they constitute, it underlines the role of virtuality in narrative and foreshadows significant developments in narrative semantics (Ryan 1991: 169–74).

3.5 The Voice of Reading

Another famous semiotician (or semiologist), Barthes, proclaimed the author's death and the reader's birth as the locus of textual meaning, the place where the various texts constituting a text are united ([1967] 1977). Moreover, he drew attention to the erotic quality of reading and distinguished between pleasurable and rapturous texts ([1973] 1975), just as he had previously distinguished between readerly and writerly texts ([1970] 1974). The former as opposed to the latter make room for the voice of reading ([1970] 1974: 151–52). They are "traditional" and can be read or understood in terms of established codes and modes. The latter are "modern," unfamiliar, strange; they can be written, but they cannot be grasped in terms of these codes and modes. In his reading of "Sarrasine," Barthes ([1970] 1974) characterized five major codes through which Balzac's novella (or, presumably, any narrative) is interpretable: the proairetic code, according to which narratives can be structured as sequences of actions; the hermeneutic code, according to which they can be structured as paths leading from questions or enigmas to (possible) answers or solutions; the referential code, in terms of which they are related to various bodies of knowledge and cultural objects; the semic code, which allows for the construction of characters and settings; and the symbolic code, which governs the production and reception of symbolic meaning. Barthes's account exerted considerable influence on theorists and critics interested in poetics as a theory of reading and in the rules and operations underlying literary competence or the ability to read texts literarily (cf. Culler 1975). Though it was widely taken to reject the assumptions and goals of narratology (e.g. the view of texts as structured products rather than productive structurations, or the ambition to develop a science of narrative), it was also highly influential on narratologists. They viewed many of its arguments as elaborations of points made in Barthes's earlier "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" ([1966] 1975). In particular, they regarded its comments on the voice of reading as developments of the brief remarks through which Barthes had drawn attention, in that famous narratological manifesto, to the signs of "the reader's presence […] within the narrative itself" ([1966] 1975: 260) as well as to the narratively signified communication between narrator and audience (249, 260–61, 264; Margolin → Narrator [3]).

3.7 The Narratee

These brief remarks—along with similar comments by Todorov (1966: 146–47) and parallel work by Genette in his outstanding investigation of narrative discourse ([1972] 1980) as well as Gibson's notion of the mock reader and Booth's discussion of the reader's second self—proved particularly relevant for Prince's exploration of the narratee, a reader figure explicitly tied to narrative and developed in terms of

narratological parameters (1971, [1973] 1980). Guided by formalist, structuralist, and semiotic principles, Prince sought to describe more accurately the structural properties of narrative and the nature of its constitutive elements. Specifically, he argued that, just as narrators are distinguished from real or implied authors, narratees should be distinguished from real, implied, or other kinds of readers. The narratee is the audience (of one or more than one) that the narrator in a given narrative addresses. Like the enunciatee (or inscribed addressee of the textual I) in any text, the narratee is different from the real reader (the flesh-and-blood person actually reading the text) and the implied reader (since it is neither the equivalent of the reader's second self nor the counterpart or complement of the implied author and since it has no privileged position or role with regard to interpretation). The narratee also differs from the ideal reader (who grasps and approves every aspect of the text), the virtual reader (for whom the real author believes s/he is writing and to whom s/he assigns various characteristics and abilities) and from such interpretive notions as superreaders, informed readers, or competent readers (inscribed in the text, it may, in fact, prove incompetent and uninformed). It is constituted and signified by textual signs of the "you" narrated to (just as the narrator is constituted and signified by textual signs of the "I" narrating): second-person pronouns and other forms of address designating that "you" as well as signs functioning in more intricate ways, such as negative passages explicitly contradicting its stated beliefs or correcting its mistakes and metanarrative explanations emphasizing the gaps in its understanding or knowledge. Analyzable along the same lines as narrators, narratees can prove more or less (temporally, intellectually, morally, emotionally) distant from the latter and more or less prominent, dramatized, familiar with the situations and events narrated, or changeable. As part of the makeup of any narrative—and in addition to representing a fundamental link and relay between real author and real reader, calling attention to the communication circuits within texts, and allowing for a more precise typology of narrative based on the kind of audience they constitute—they always help to characterize narrators through their links with them and can contribute to plot development as well as underscore various themes. Besides the narratee, Prince (1982: 103–43) discussed the real readers of narratives and the act of reading narratively—stressing not only the constraints imposed by the text, but also the ways in which the readers' nature, interests, and goals partly determine the assumptions they make about texts, the questions they ask of them, the answers they formulate—and he also discussed how (narrative) texts partly read themselves, as it were, by commenting explicitly on some of their constituents (1980).

3.8 Other Audiences

The narratee, which was examined further by Piwowarczyk (1976), integrated into

Chatman's account of the various participants in narrative transactions (1978: 147–51, 253–62) and revisited by Prince (1985), who distinguished a narration's enunciatee from its ostensible (though not real) addressee and from its receiver, resembles what Rabinowitz (1977, 1987) called the "narrative audience" in his characterization of audiences of fictional narratives. Working in Booth's rhetorical tradition, Rabinowitz explored the beliefs, values, and reception positions that readers (must) have or adopt when reading fiction. Rabinowitz distinguished between the actual audience, the authorial audience or hypothetical audience for whom the text is composed, the ideal narrative audience for whom the narrator (rather than the real author or the implied author) wishes s/he were narrating, and the narrative audience for whom s/he is narrating. As opposed to the actual audience and the authorial audience, the narrative audience considers the represented characters and events to be real and believes that the fiction narrated is a history. As opposed to the narratee, it is not so much a figure "out there" in the text as a role that the text asks (or requires) the real reader to play. Rabinowitz's model was largely adopted by Booth ([1961] 1983: 422–31) and clarified by Phelan (1996: 135–53). It not only constitutes a tool for discussing various kinds of mimetic effects, various types of narrative ambiguity, various sources of misreading, but also captures the interplay of different belief systems at work in the act of reading narrative fiction.

Alhough the prominence of reader-oriented criticism began to abate by the mid-1980s, partly because many of its views of texts, their interpretation, and their evaluation became commonplace, interest in readers and reading continues to be significant (cf. Nardocchio ed. 1992; Machor & Goldstein eds. 2001; Schweickart & Flynn eds. 2004; Schmid 2007). In the area of narrative study, in particular, second-person narrative (and its blurring of distinctions between, say, the protagonist, the narratee, and the narrative audience) has been further explored (Fludernik ed. 1994), different manifestations of textual audiences have been further examined (Richardson 1997), and the reader's gradual construction of narrative meaning has been further investigated (Kafalenos 2006). Through the integration of research in cognitive science and discourse processing, "natural" narratology has linked readers' narrativization of texts with parameters derived from their real-life experience (Fludernik 1996); psychonarratology has studied the psychological factors and operations underlying readers' immersion in and understanding of narrative (Gerrig 1993; Bortolussi & Dixon 2003); cognitive narratology (Herman → Cognitive Narratology [4]) has aimed to analyze and characterize narrative situations and moves in terms of scripts, schemata (Emmott & Alexander → Schemata [5]), and preference-rule systems activated during the reading process (Jahn 1997); and, in general, postclassical narratology has paid considerable attention to the interface between narratives and their readers (Herman 2002).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

The various lines of inquiry mentioned above should be elaborated and complemented by further experimental studies of the different kinds of effect (physical, intellectual, emotional) produced by different kinds of text (narrative or non-narrative, literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional, in a book or online) and different kinds of (narrative) technique on readers differing in terms of class, gender, race, sexuality, aim, or ability. As for narratologists in particular, they should develop formal accounts of narrative and its functioning that explicitly make room for the voice of the real reader. In other words, they should devise models indicating how, for instance, certain (portions of) texts can function as iterative or singulative narrative, as free indirect or narratized discourse, as presenting synchronous or asynchronous events, and therefore can yield different meanings depending on the interpretive decisions of that reader.

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